

A HELP
TO
PROFESSING CHRISTIANS,
IN JUDGING
THEIR SPIRITUAL STATE
AND
GROWTH IN GRACE.

BY THE REV. JOHN BARR,
AUTHOR OF 'PLAIN CATECHETICAL INSTRUCTIONS ON BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S
SUPPER,' AND 'THE SCRIPTURE STUDENT'S ASSISTANT.'

Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves: know ye not
your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates.

2 Cor. xiii. 5

Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

2 Peter iii. 18

SECOND EDITION.

GLASGOW:
BLACKIE & SON, 38, QUEEN STREET
5, SOUTH COLLEGE STREET, EDINBURGH;
AND 21, WARWICK SQUARE, LONDON.
MDCCCXXVII.

GLASGOW:
PRINTED BY GEORGE BROOKMAN.

P R E F A C E

TO THE FIRST EDITION.

ABOVE two years ago, the Writer of the following series of discourses, in the course of his ordinary ministrations, addressed them from the pulpit to those under his pastoral care. Though he had some intention at that time, from the hope of their being useful, to have given them to the public; yet from circumstances, which it is unnecessary to mention, the work was entirely laid aside, till within a few weeks prior to its being put to press. In reconsidering the topics here illustrated, he has judged it proper to extend his original plan. Instead of confining himself to a few of the most striking particulars in each Chapter, he has greatly augmented their number,—so greatly that in several instances it is now nearly doubled. The consequence of this has been, that, to prevent the enlargement of the volume, and to preserve some proportion among its different parts, he has been compelled very much to compendise the points formerly delivered from the pulpit.

The subjects here considered are obviously of general and transcendent importance. The first of all attainments to every man is, *the knowledge of*

himself. Yet among the thousands who assume a Christian profession, multitudes are ignorant of their spiritual state. They are hastening blindfolded to eternity.—To stimulate such persons seriously and without delay to try their character by the word of God, and to afford some help both to them, and to all who are solicitous to know their real condition, is the design of the Author in this work. His aim has been to treat every part of it with Scriptural plainness and simplicity. As he is not aware of any previous treatise on the same plan, he fondly hopes that it may be serviceable to the cause of vital godliness.—To the care of that Divine Redeemer he now commits it, for the spiritual good of whose church it has been penned ; and to Him he looks up in prayer, to render this humble effort instrumental in opening the eyes of some who are self-deceivers, and in ministering direction and comfort to his own saints !

J. B.

GLASGOW, *December*, 1830.

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CHAPTER I.

DUTY AND IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING OUR RELIGIOUS CHARACTER.

Introductory observations,—ignorance of their spiritual state common among professing Christians,—neglect of self-examination one of the great causes of this,—this duty enforced, 1. God has commanded it.—2. God has furnished means suited to its performance.—3. God has promised the assistance of his Spirit.—4. Ignorance of our state therefore dishonouring and offensive to God.—5. All other knowledge of little importance compared with this.—6. Of vast importance to those who are not genuine Christians.—7. Necessary to the peace and comfort of true believers.—8. Without it none can aright improve the means of grace.—9. The longer this duty is delayed it becomes the more difficult.—10. Opportunities for it will soon be at an end.—11. We must soon be tried and judged by God.

IF it be true that we are creatures destined for eternal happiness or misery, and that after the lapse of a short and very uncertain period, we must enter on one or other of these states; it must be of vast importance to know which of them, we have just cause to conclude, shall be our lot. To be ignorant of this, notwithstanding that God has furnished us with the means of ascertaining it, and plainly enjoined it as our duty, is not only foolish and impious, but utterly incompatible with all present rational happiness; and to be living under mistaken notions respecting it, is eminently dangerous, and may prove fatal to our immortal interests. What true enjoyment can we experience, while we are uncertain whether heaven

or hell shall be our portion; and whether every hour which arrives may not be that which shall terminate our connexion with this world, hurry us into the presence of our omniscient and almighty Judge, and **fix** our doom beyond the possibility of change? And, should we, like too many, be deceiving ourselves respecting our character and prospects, fondly dreaming that all is well, till this great and final change discover to us our error, our ruin must be awful and irretrievable.

Did the present life comprehend the whole of our existence, the case would be widely altered. Then we might securely adopt the creed of the sensualist, “**Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.**” But of the truth of this gloomy anticipation, it is impossible that any man can obtain assurance; whilst the doctrine of a future state is established on the best evidence which can be given. We know on the highest authority that we are not sent into this world, and furnished with so many advantages for religious improvement, simply that we may gratify our appetites,—alternately labour and take repose,—flutter amid the gay scenes of fashionable amusement, or toil in daily drudgery; and, after a few years thus spent, sink into everlasting forgetfulness. The design of our being is infinitely more worthy the wisdom of our Creator, and intended to serve infinitely nobler purposes. We are sent into this world to prepare for that which is beyond the grave; and we are assured that our time of preparation for it is bounded by this mortal state.

Nothing, therefore, can be of equal magnitude and importance to us with the business of our salvation,—the securing of our personal interest in the Lord

Jesus Christ; and nothing can be equally conducive to our present happiness, as to know, on good evidence, that we are the regenerated children of God, and that we are growing in meetness for the kingdom of glory. Compared with a title to eternal life every thing else is trivial and insignificant. The most deeply interesting concerns of this world, are but as the drop of the bucket compared with the waters of the ocean, or the small dust of the balance compared with the ponderous mountains. As eternity infinitely outmeasures time, so a title to everlasting life infinitely transcends all earthly pursuits and acquisitions. "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" And, compared with the knowledge that we ourselves are among the saved of the Lord, all other knowledge is little worth. They who have reached this attainment, though untutored in the learning of this world, and unpossessed of its riches, honours, and pleasures, enjoy a source of the richest consolation.—consolation which animates the heart amid the most trying calamities of life, and in the solemn hour of death. Whereas those who are destitute of this, though deeply skilled in literature and science, and highly exalted in rank and wealth, are exposed to bear the evils of this mortal state without inward support, and to meet dissolution in its most heart-appalling and terrific form.

Ready as professing Christians are to admit all this in speculation, too many of them treat it practically with neglect. They neither attend to the salvation of their souls, as the principal business of life; nor do they know the ground on which they stand,

in the prospect of death and eternity. It is a painful truth, that few of them comparatively,—very few indeed,—possess a clear and scriptural knowledge of their spiritual state and character before God. When closely interrogated respecting the foundation of their hopes for eternity, and their claims to genuine godliness, by far the greater proportion are unable to specify any thing which is distinctive and satisfactory. Common as it is to hear them affirm, that they are not without *some hopes* that they are real Christians; yet when urged to mention what these hopes are, and on what ground they are built, multitudes of them can fix on nothing,—or at least nothing which is scriptural and decisive. Their hopes, as they call them, are rather the fond longings of a natural desire of immortal felicity, than the result of any thing like evidence that they are really the children of God. Strictly speaking, they are rather *wishes* than hopes, though thus commonly named,—vague wishes of everlasting happiness, without any foundation to expect its attainment, except it be their Christian profession, and a few formal religious observances.

Every professing Christian knows, or ought to know, that all who assume the name of disciples of Christ, and observe the outward forms of duty, are not genuine saints. Many have a name to live, who are spiritually dead. Many have the form of godliness, who are destitute of its spirit and power. Christ himself affirms, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven;” and tells us that to many such he will say in the great day of judgment, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”*

* Mat. vii. 21, 23.

These hopes, therefore, which are built simply on the assumption of the Christian name, and the external observance of a few forms of worship, are so obviously and utterly fallacious, that they ought not for a moment to be a ground of confidence to any man who can read his bible. And yet this constitutes the amount of the religion of multitudes, who flatter themselves with hopes of heaven.

There are others who approximate much nearer to the Christian character, but who are equally destitute of vital godliness. In addition to their religious profession, and a becoming attention to the external duties of morality and piety, they conceive that they have some experience of the internal workings of holiness. They specify their painful convictions, their sorrow for sin, their love to the people of God, their love to Christ, their delight in his ordinances, &c.; and consequently believe that they are not far from the kingdom of God. And yet, after careful and minute inquiry, they too are found deceiving themselves with the mere semblance of piety. What they deem sure proofs of their Christian discipleship, may have an imposing similarity to the features of God's children. But when tried by the word of God, and tried with requisite judgment and discrimination, their unsoundness is detected. They are found to be mere counterfeits of the sterling coin of heaven. And were such persons qualified to distinguish the former from the latter, and to make the trial with necessary diligence and impartiality, they would see their delusion, and be driven with alarm from their false confidence.

This ignorance of their spiritual state, which is so common among professing Christians, is not confined

to those who are self-deceivers. On the strictest and most extensive inquiry it will be found, that, among genuine believers, the number who have clear views of the evidences of their regeneration, and assurance of their saving interest in Christ, is small indeed. Some of this description, blessed be God, are occasionally to be found. But it is by no means the common attainment of those who are generally, and we think justly, regarded by all who best know them, true and eminent saints. It happens not unfrequently that such persons do not themselves enjoy the comfort of seeing this. Though all of them earnestly desire to reach assurance, yet too many of them are not able to say that they have it in possession.

The question naturally occurs here, To what are we to ascribe this prevalent,—exceedingly prevalent, ignorance and error, respecting their spiritual state, among those who have a Christian profession? That they are exceedingly common will not admit of a doubt. And that they relate to a matter which is of universal and superlative importance, can be denied by no man. How, then, shall we account for the fact that so few among the avowed followers of Christ, possess clear and scriptural views of their real character and prospects for eternity?

To this question it is not enough to say, that it arises from the extreme difficulty of the inquiry,—an inquiry, accounted by some, altogether impracticable. That it is difficult, is most readily granted. And that the difficulties with which it is accompanied are both numerous and formidable, is not denied. But great as they are, they are not insurmountable, as I shall endeavour to show in the following chapter.

Were this the case, no man would be commanded by God to search and know his state, and prospects for eternity, and encouraged to expect that his investigation shall be crowned with success. Were this the case, no man could be blamed for mistaking his character, and continuing under the ruinous power of self-deception. The former of these, however, is explicitly commanded in the sacred volume, and the latter reprehended and condemned.

The grand cause of this uncertainty and delusion among those who are not true christians, *is sloth*,—the want of diligent endeavours clearly to understand the scripture marks of genuine godliness, and to examine their heart and life by them. How few of such persons can lay their hands on their hearts, and appeal to the omniscient Jehovah that they have tried their character frequently, diligently, and patiently, by the marks contained in the Bible, descriptive both of the righteous and the wicked; and yet cannot determine whether they are the friends or the enemies of Christ? Many of them have never even *once* in good earnest engaged in this duty. Though they may again and again have attempted something like self-examination; yet it was so limited, superficial, and hastily despatched, that they could not arrive at a clear and convincing result. To the truth of this charge too many must plead guilty. Their consciences must tell them, that never, on any occasion, have they spent one entire hour in this exercise. And what is more, some of them may not have employed even that short time in this work, during the whole of their life. Such persons, therefore, instead of complaining of its difficulty, ought rather to condemn themselves for their own indo-

lence. Were they carefully to study the manner in which it ought to be performed, and to address themselves to it with determined and persevering application, the deepest and most thorough-paced formalist among them, could not long remain in utter uncertainty or mistake, respecting his spiritual condition.

Nor are the genuine children of God to be exempted from the charge of sloth, in regard to the duty of self-examination. None of them, it is true, can be total strangers to it; for this of itself is no inconsiderable evidence of a heart unrenewed by the Spirit of God. Yet there is reason to suspect, in these cases in which they are long under darkness, doubts, and fears respecting their state, that this duty is not performed with suitable care and diligence, or at least, not with judgment and discrimination. The neglect of it for a season, or the improper observance of it, though there was no other obstruction, must hinder them from seeing the work of grace in themselves, and consequently subject them to gloom and sorrow. Various other causes may operate in producing this effect, as we shall afterwards mention.* But it is sufficient to state here, that this is one cause, and a very common one, of the spiritual darkness and uncertainty of many Christians. Did they better understand the difficulties connected with self-examination, and the manner in which it may be successfully performed; and were they habitually to live in its frequent observance, their doubts and uncertainty would vanish, and they would obtain comforting views of the good work of the Holy Spirit in their soul.

With the view, therefore, of impressing on your

* See Chapter II.

mind, my reader, the duty and importance of speedily knowing your character,[•] I solicit your attentive and serious perusal of the following considerations. And, O that the Spirit of God would render them instrumental in exciting you, and all under whose eye they may come, to diligent and impartial self-examination!

1. God has expressly commanded this duty.—The Spirit of God, addressing the church at Corinth, by the apostle Paul, thus plainly, and urgently, and repeatedly charges them, “Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you except ye be reprobates?”* Here this duty is not only commanded, but pressed home with peculiar vehemency. The charge is reiterated to prevent the possibility of any one misunderstanding it, and to secure the attention of all to it as a matter of the highest importance. As a master, when he addresses a charge of more than ordinary magnitude to his servant, repeats it again and again, and in various forms; so the apostle manifests his solicitude to secure obedience to this injunction. In allusion to the assayer who tries metals by the touchstone, or by chemical analysis, to ascertain whether they be pure, or adulterated; the members of this church are thus earnestly required by Paul to examine, and thoroughly prove themselves, that they may know whether they are *approved* of the Lord, or *rejected*.—Another charge of the same kind, is addressed to the churches in Galatia: “If a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and

• 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another."* The apostle here plainly admits the fact, that professed believers might practise the most dangerous self-deception, by imagining that they were truly gracious, while yet they were utterly graceless. To prevent the fatal consequences of this, he commands every man among them to make a careful trial and proof of his own character and practice, and not to rely on the favourable opinion of others. Thus the deceived would be apprised of his danger; and the genuine saint would have the comfort arising from the well grounded knowledge of his gracious state.

These commands, thus addressed to those primitive churches, are equally applicable to all the churches of Christ in every age and country. They are not of a peculiar and local nature, and intended to be of use to those only to whom they were first delivered. On the contrary, they obviously belong to the decision of a question which is universally and permanently interesting. In all churches there are some who stand as much in need of them, as the professing believers in Corinth and Galatia.—Above all, let it be remembered, they are commands divinely authoritative. Written as they were under the infallible guidance of the Spirit of God, they have the high sanction of him who is supreme Governor of the universe. As certainly as if you heard them spoken in awful majesty from heaven, they are unequivocal charges to you from the Lord God of hosts, to examine and prove your spiritual state. This consideration, therefore, apart from every other which can be urged, ought to have the weight of a

* Gal. vi. 3, 4.

thousand arguments and motives. God requires it; consequently there is no room to dispute your obligation to perform it, unless you presume to reject his authority.

2. God not only has commanded you to try your character, but also furnished you with means suited to this investigation. God is not a hard master who requires difficult services from you, without imparting any help for their performance. Had this been the case in regard to self-examination, the task would have been impracticable. Accompanied as it is with so many difficulties, had you been left without a sure guide, you could not have known, after the most diligent investigation, whether you did, or did not, possess the character of God's children. But so far from this, he has provided you with the test by which you are to try yourself; and he has brought it near to you, and set it clearly before you in the sacred scriptures. Here numerous, minute, and explicit delineations are given of the characters both of the righteous and the wicked. Here they are described with respect to their widely different principles, dispositions, tempers, views, aims, hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, experience, and practice. Here these portraitures are drawn for the express purpose that they may be used as mirrors, in some of which every man may perceive his own likeness, and ascertain to which class of characters he belongs.—No man, therefore, who has access to this holy volume, and who is capable of perusing it with understanding, can excuse himself from the performance of this duty, on the ground that he has nothing to assist him in it,—no plain and infallible marks by which he may know with certainty what is his spiritual state.

Here, they are furnished in rich abundance and variety, suited to the condition, circumstances, and capacity of every child of Adam.—Since, therefore, you are commanded by God to search and try your character, and furnished with the means suited to assist you in this investigation, you are doubly inexcusable if you persist in the neglect of this duty.

3. God has promised his Holy Spirit to assist you in self-examination.—Valuable beyond all estimation though his written word be, and essentially necessary as it is, as the grand test of character in this trial, without divine illumination and guidance we could not rightly understand and apply it to ourselves. From the darkness of our minds, we cannot know aright the things of God, which are all spiritually discerned. We are prone to put good for evil, and evil for good,—to put light for darkness, and darkness for light,—to substitute the outward semblance of godliness, in place of its vital reality. And from the deceitfulness of our hearts, and the partiality of self-love, we are ever ready to judge too favourably of our state and actions, and to claim that honour and comfort to which we have no just title. To guard you against mistakes so dangerous in this difficult investigation, you are encouraged to ask, and to expect, the supernatural aids of the Holy Ghost.

When our blessed Lord, in compliance with the request of his disciples, gave them a pattern for their help in prayer, he urged them to the frequent and importunate practice of this duty, by various considerations, and apposite similitudes. “Ask,” says he, “and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one

that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?" Now mark well the encouraging inference which he draws from this;—"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"* This is no dark and equivocal promise. It is as plain as language can make it; and it is as encouraging as it is plain. They who ask the Holy Spirit shall obtain him, in his divine influences, for all the gracious purposes for which he is promised. Supernatural illumination is one of these. This blessing Christ promised to his disciples;—"The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things."† And the beloved disciple, writing to those whom he designates his "little children," or the followers of Christ at large, explicitly affirms concerning them, "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things;"‡ that is, by the Holy Ghost, ye have a spiritual, experimental, and saving knowledge of all the revealed truths of the gospel.

With this assistance, therefore, how difficult soever the work of self-examination may be, you shall be fitted for its performance. "The Spirit who searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God," if you fervently and believingly supplicate his illumination and guidance, will enable you to search

* Luke xi. 9-13.

† John xiv. 26.

‡ 1 John ii. 18, 20.

and to know yourself. On the one hand, he will discover to you the real state of your heart, and the true character of your general deportment. And, on the other, he will qualify you to understand the spiritual import of those marks of his children, which are delineated in his word; and consequently will fit you accurately to compare your attainments with them, and to discern your real condition. With his word, therefore, in your hand, humbly bow at his throne of grace, and pour forth the Psalmist's prayer, "O send forth thy light, and thy truth; let them lead me and guide me."

4. Amid these advantages, ignorance of your spiritual state, or self-deception respecting it, must be dishonouring and offensive to God.—Since he has plainly commanded the duty of self-examination, furnished you with means for its performance, and promised the assistance of his Spirit, if you ask it aright; how dishonouring to God must it be to treat this duty with neglect! Would not you yourself be greatly offended with a dependant whom you had strictly charged, and that for his own advantage, to execute a piece of work, if, after you had provided him with all that was requisite for it, and engaged to give him all needful assistance, you found him refusing to attempt its performance, or doing it in the most careless and superficial manner? How much greater cause has God to be angry with you, while you dare to live thus in the direct violation of his precept, and to slight the means which he has provided, and the help which he has proffered? Is it not a daring insult to the God of heaven, to cast his commandment behind your back, or to trample it under your feet; and practically to tell him to his

face, that in this you will not submit to his authority? Is it not a daring insult to his wisdom and goodness, to refuse to employ the means with which he has furnished you for ascertaining your spiritual state and prospects for eternity, or to use them only with trifling indifference? Is it not a daring insult to his condescending grace, to lend a deaf ear to his promised assistance; and, instead of earnestly supplicating it from him, and looking up for its attainment, to scorn to make it the subject of prayer?

All this guilt you are chargeable with, while you willingly continue ignorant of your spiritual state, and neglect this duty by which you might know your real character. With you, therefore, God is justly displeased, and your present course he has explicitly condemned. In consequence of your ignorance of your state, like the Laodiceans you may imagine that you are "rich, and increased with goods, and stand in need of nothing." But like them too, you know not that you are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked;" and that, continuing thus, God will spue you out of his mouth,—reject you utterly as an abomination. That servant who knew his lord's will, but did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes. To you, and to all such, God thus speaks, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin." "They know not, neither will they understand: they walk on in darkness." "It is a people of no understanding: therefore he that made them will not have mercy on them."*

5. All other knowledge is of little value, compared

* John xv. 22. ; Psal. lxxxii. 5. ; Isa. xxvii. 11.

with the knowledge of your spiritual state.—It is far from my design to depreciate what is usually denominated, *useful knowledge*. All literary and scientific acquirements are valuable, and have been frequently rendered instrumental in promoting the happiness of our race. Instead, therefore, of wishing that less time and attention were devoted to such studies, it would be greatly conducive to the interests of society, were mankind more generally to embark in pursuits so rational and dignified.—But while all this is admitted, is there not something preposterous and irrational in creatures, destined for an eternal world, to spend all their time and energies in seeking what must perish with the present life, while they overlook that which is most obviously connected with their true happiness, both in this world, and in that which is beyond the grave? Does not reason, as well as divine revelation say, that the latter ought to have the decided preference,—to be first in our esteem, and to have the first of our time and care; and that the former should be wholly subordinated to its attainment?

Instead of this, however, the very reverse is usually the case. How many who have spent ten or twelve years in the acquirement of languages, and in exploring the paths of philosophy, are totally ignorant whether they are born again, or still in a state of nature; and yet have not occupied as many hours or minutes in earnestly endeavouring to determine this question, all-important though it be! Of what benefit can merely human science be to such persons when they are on the brink of eternity, and when they shall stand before the tribunal of Christ? In such circumstances, would not those who have been

long and widely famed for their erudition, but who have remained ignorant of their own state for eternity, be ardently desirous to exchange conditions with the most illiterate peasant who has known himself, and consequently been excited to secure an interest in his God and Saviour?—Persuaded of this, let that knowledge which is most valuable in itself,—that which belongs to your present and eternal peace, be your first study.

6. If you be not a child of God, it is of vast importance that you should speedily know this.—That many who are admitted to the outward privileges of the Christian church, are not truly the disciples of Christ, cannot be controverted. Such persons, however, when their conduct is free from gross violations of duty, and their observance of the forms of godliness is somewhat regular, very commonly “are at ease in Zion.” They are quite satisfied with their religious state and attainments, and unwilling to have their peace, false though it be, disturbed by any minute and thorough inquiry. Flattered by others, and pleased with themselves, they are in danger of continuing to dream of peace and safety, till they awake in hell.

Now, if this be your condition, my dear reader, it is impossible to arouse you from your dangerous security, till you be convinced that it is so. And how can you be convinced of this till you have carefully examined your state, compared it with the word of God, and seen, on the evidence of divine authority, that you are destitute, of genuine piety? Such a trial of yourself is essentially necessary to apprize you of your exposure to divine wrath, and to excite you to seek that safety which can be found only in

Christ. While in your own estimation you are whole, you cannot perceive your need of this divine Physician, nor duly appreciate his inestimable worth. But were you diligently to search and try your ways, your false peace would be broken,—your fatal delusion would be dispelled,—and you would be forced to abandon your present grounds of confidence. And surely this cannot be done too speedily.

Were you affected with a dangerous malady, insensible as you might be of it in the meanwhile, would it not be of importance that you should discover it as soon as possible, and not through ignorance allow it to proceed in its career, without any attempt to eradicate it till it had become incurable? Were a deadly plague raging around you, and every day multitudes falling victims to its ravages, would you not frequently examine yourself to find whether you had any of its symptoms? And yet can you treat with indifference and neglect the most dangerous of all maladies,—the most fatal of all plagues? When you are assured by God himself that the leprosy of sin has infected every son of Adam, and consequently *you* as certainly as any other, and that unless it be speedily cured, it will subject you to eternal death; dare you notwithstanding remain unconcerned about your danger? Though the gospel points you to a Physician who is both able and willing, without price, to cure this disease, will you not take the pains to inquire whether you have really applied to him, and experienced the healing virtue of his blood, or only dreamt that this is your case? If you are deceiving yourself, imagining that you have already been freed from the killing power of this malady, while yet it rankles at your

heart,—think, O seriously think, if it would not be of mighty importance that you should be aroused to a sense of your awful peril before it be too late? By careful self-examination this may be effected. Your error and danger will thus be discovered, and yet you may be saved. But by persisting in your present course, your perdition must be inevitable. As you, therefore, value your own soul, and desire to escape the damnation of hell, and to obtain glory, honour and immortality, eternal life, speedily address yourself to this work.

7. Though you be a real Christian, while you remain in doubt of this, you must in a great measure be deprived of spiritual comfort.—That there are many genuine saints who do not clearly see their claim to this character, cannot be reasonably questioned. Such persons are, in a great measure, strangers to spiritual comfort. Their state may be safe, but it is destitute of that “peace and joy in believing,” which God has provided for his children. Though they be on the way to the celestial Zion: yet they advance slowly, heavily, and amid much gloom and sorrow. They are harassed with doubts and fears,—dejected in spirit,—and frequently uttering sighs and bitter lamentations. They long and pray for the consolations of Christ, but cannot find them.

If you, my dear brother, be indeed a child of God, and yet habitually under this painful darkness and disquietude, it is in vain for you to expect deliverance from it, till you know your calling of God. Till you see that you possess the character of a believer in Christ, and are indeed among those who have passed from spiritual death to spiritual life,

you cannot participate of their exalted felicity. This, however, you cannot see without careful and diligent self-examination. But if you assiduously and perseveringly engage in this duty, without doubt you will sooner or later discover somewhat of the Spirit's work, both in your heart and in your practice. And then, but not till then, shall your gloom be dispelled, and your sorrow be exchanged for joy,—“joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

Are you not prepared to say, that you would account this the greatest happiness which you would desire on earth? Could you read your title to eternal life, by clearly perceiving the agreement between the work of the Spirit in your heart, and the descriptions of it contained in the divine word; would you not esteem it of infinitely greater magnitude, than were you unexpectedly to discover that you are the rightful heir of the richest estate in our country? Would you not account every earthly attainment unworthy to be compared with this? Like an apostle, are you not ready cordially to join in testifying, that you would count all other gain but as loss, for the excellent knowledge of Christ Jesus your Lord; and that there is no labour to which you would not willingly submit, and no sacrifice which you would not willingly make, to be able to see your interest in his sacrifice?—Go then, and actively, frequently, and impartially try your character by his word. And, connecting this with the diligent and conscientious observance of all the appointed means of grace, you will soon arrive at this most blissful attainment.

8. If you be ignorant of your state, whatever your character be, you cannot aright improve the means of grace.—Let me suppose that you are

merely a nominal Christian, but uncertain whether or not it be so, how can you suitably apply to yourself the word of God? When you peruse its hallowed pages, or hear them read and its doctrines preached; are you not in continual danger of perverting it to your own hurt? Instead of seeing your own character in its descriptions of the wicked, and listening to your own condemnation and exposure to misery in its awful threatenings; are you not in continual hazard of putting them past yourself, and of applying them to others? Instead of regarding the great and precious promises as intended for others, and what you have no right to claim; are you not in danger of flattering yourself that their rich blessings and consolations are intended for you? And when you engage in the exercises of prayer, instead of confining your supplications that God would begin in you the good work of grace, and make you a partaker of the heavenly birth; are you not ready to ask its advancement, and to implore blessings which God bestows on none except his regenerated sons and daughters? Instead, therefore, of improving the means of grace for your conversion, you thus abuse them to your remaining in a state of security and spiritual death.

On the other hand, let me suppose that you are truly a child of God, while you continue ignorant that this is your state, it is impossible that you can aright employ the means of grace. Instead of endeavouring to advance your sanctification, and to rear the spiritual building, your whole solicitude will be about laying the foundation. Instead of marching onward in the way which leads to heaven, you will timidly and doubtingly linger at the first stage

of your journey, questioning whether you have yet entered upon the right road. Ever uncertain respecting your real state, you will be kept from effectually endeavouring to "grow in grace," and to "perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord." You will be alarmed by threatenings which apply, not to you, but to others; and you will put from you that consolation to which you are entitled. And, even when you pray in language appropriate to your case that "the God of peace would sanctify you thoroughly, in soul, in body, and in spirit," and that he would more and more conform you to his image and will, —your doubts and uncertainty about your condition, will incline you to think that you have prayed amiss, by supplicating the progress of a work which is yet to begin. Thus, to a great degree, you counteract your petitions. And though, in spite of your misconduct, God will not utterly abandon his own good work in your soul; yet its progress towards perfection must be slow, and to you imperceptible.

If you desire to make advancement in holiness, first endeavour to know that the seed of holiness has been planted by the Spirit of God in your heart. When once this important point is ascertained, then you will be better prepared to seek after the watering and cherishing of the good seed, that it may spring up and produce a plentiful harvest of the fruits of righteousness. Then your prayers will be presented to the Lord in good earnest, that he would promote in you a growing assimilation to the image of Christ, and a meetness for the heavenly inheritance. Then you will employ the means of grace with a direct view to the specific ends for which you ought to use them,—the mortification of remaining

sin, and the maturing of every holy principle. Thus your profiting will soon be made apparent both to yourself and to others. You will become "the living epistle of Christ, known and read of all men."

9. As a farther inducement speedily to engage in self-examination, consider, that the longer you delay this duty, the more difficult it will become.—Were you called to sit in judgment on the character of another, delay might be of advantage, that you might have time to collect evidence, and obtain all possible information. But the case is widely different when you are required to try yourself. Here the evidence is all at hand. You need only to look within to your heart, and without to your general practice, and you will have it all before you. So far from deriving advantage from procrastinating this important search, any farther than is needful to understand the manner in which it should be performed, you will greatly increase the difficulty.—By delay, the points respecting which you should examine yourself will become more numerous, and consequently your work be rendered more complex and tedious. The merchant who has allowed his books to remain long unbalanced, while yet his business is going on, every day that he continues to put off the task, makes it more arduous and forbidding. Exactly so you will find it in respect to balancing your accounts for eternity. Every day's delay will increase the amount of your work, and the difficulty attending its performance. Your aversion to engage in it will thus be strengthened. Though you may flatter yourself that you not only will have more leisure for it at a future period, but feel better disposed to struggle with its difficulties; yet be assured the very reverse of this

shall be experienced. As every succeeding day finds you more indisposed for it in the meanwhile, without doubt it will continue increasingly so in time to come. If, therefore, you hope ever to find it easy, you must address yourself to it without any longer delay.

10. Consider that your opportunities for self-examination will soon be at an end.—To you God has already given much time to prepare for eternity. Sabbath has been added to sabbath, and year to year, that you might secure immortal happiness, by believing in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and by bringing forth fruits meet for repentance. But still you are ignorant whether this work is properly begun. Still you know not whether you are a genuine believer in Christ, or under the fearful condemnation of unbelief. “Now it is high time to awake out of sleep.” Your day of life may already be far spent, and the night of your death may be at hand. Uncertain as you are of the duration of your abode on earth, you ought not to delay another day, till you diligently examine your state, and know that you are endeavouring to rest on Christ for salvation. Before another day has arrived it may be too late. Your course may be finished, and your destiny unalterably fixed. You can have no assurance of the contrary.

It is readily admitted, that if you be interested in Christ, though unassured of it, death cannot hurt you. But though you may be saved, it will be as by fire, —through much disquietude and apprehension of danger. In such a case, you must be deprived of opportunities to honour God upon earth, by gratefully acknowledging what he has wrought in you, and

encouraged you to expect. You must put it out of your power to be instrumental in inducing others to glorify your heavenly Father, by testifying to them from your experience, that wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness; and by inviting them, from what you have felt, to taste and see that God is good. And you must, to a great degree, want that consolation which alleviates the pressure of affliction, cheers the soul in passing through the dark valley and shadow of death, and inspires a song of triumph on the brink of the grave. As you value these advantages, lose not your present opportunities.

But should you be found a self-deceiver, flattering yourself with delusive hopes of heaven, till death open your eyes on eternity, your mistake must be fatal. Your knowledge of your state then, will be too late to enable you to rectify your error. Much as you may then desire to have another opportunity to search and try your ways, and to turn to the Lord, to obtain it will be impossible. Though the wealth of worlds then were yours, you would readily part with it all to receive one of these precious hours with which you are now favoured, but which you so much undervalue and neglect. Let this consideration, therefore, stimulate you without delay to set about the work of self-examination. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might: for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest."*

11. The period is not far distant when you must be tried and judged by God.—The man who is assured that his conduct must be subjected to the scrutiny of a strict and impartial judge, ought carefully

* Eccl. ix. 10.

and frequently to try himself. Nor will it be found otherwise, in matters pertaining to this life. The most thoughtless and hardened of our race, when he finds that unavoidably he must appear before an earthly tribunal, to be tried at the hazard of losing his life, cannot remain indifferent about the result. He must and will particularly inquire into all the circumstances of his case, and be solicitous to know how it is possible for him to escape condemnation.

You, my dear reader, have been forewarned by God himself, that "he has appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given assurance to all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead;" and that "he will then render to every man according to the deeds done in the body."* You have been assured by him who is the Amen, the faithful, and the true Witness, that your thoughts, and words, and actions shall then be minutely and thoroughly searched,—that every secret purpose and deed shall be brought forth to light, and your real character be nakedly exposed, in all its deformity, in the presence of assembled angels and men. You know that it is impossible for you to evade this strict, and public, and impartial scrutiny. And already you are informed what shall be the truly fearful sentence which the Almighty Judge shall pronounce against you, if you be found destitute of a saving interest in Christ.

With all this clearly before you, what dreadful infatuation is it to remain cold and unconcerned about the decision of that great and terrible day of the Lord! Instead of this, might we not reasonably ex-

* Acts xvii. 31. Rom. ii. 6.

pect that you would be filled with an unceasing solicitude, to know what shall then be your portion? Might we not reasonably expect that you would account no labour too much to ascertain this, assured as you are that it may now be ascertained, and commanded and encouraged as you are to seek to know it? Might we not think that it would be impossible for you tranquilly to embark in any worldly pursuit, to participate of any worldly pleasure, or to give sleep to your eyes and slumber to your eyelids, while you are uncertain what shall be your lot on that day? Might we not conclude that the prospect of that great and final judgment, from which there is no exemption and no appeal, would incessantly haunt your minds by day, and disturb your dreams by night? Might we not conclude, that such a prospect would permit you no longer to live in doubt respecting your spiritual state, and compel you to use your utmost endeavours to make sure your title to eternal life; that when Christ shall be revealed from heaven, with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, you also may appear with him in glory?

Ponder now, my reader, these arguments and motives to self-examination. Cast them not with cold indifference behind your back, as matters in which you have no interest. Rather account them a message from the Lord, calling you to a duty intimately connected with your peace and safety in time, and your happiness for eternity. And that you may be qualified to engage in it with understanding, and to perform it with advantage, I shall endeavour, in the following chapters, to give you some assistance.

CHAPTER II.

DIFFICULTIES IN JUDGING OUR RELIGIOUS CHARACTER.

1. The want of scriptural and clear views of what constitute genuine evidences of Christian character.—2. The imposing similarity between saving grace and its counterfeits.—3. The partiality of self-love.—4. Timorous and humble diffidence in real believers.—5. Diversity of natural temper, and the effects of early education and habits.—6. Proneness to look at outward actions, without attending to the motives from which they proceed; and inability, in many instances, to ascertain what our motives were.—7. Smallness of grace, and imperfections of character.—8. Seasons of spiritual darkness and desertion.—9. The temptations of Satan.—10. A state of melancholy.

BEFORE we commence any momentous undertaking, it is of the utmost importance that we be fully apprized of the difficulties with which it is attended. Should we rashly enter on it, while ignorant of these, obviously we must be in danger of being misled by them, and of proving unsuccessful. Or, should we come to the knowledge of them unexpectedly, as we proceed, we cannot fail to be discouraged, as well as impeded, in our work,—if not perhaps deterred from its prosecution. Whereas, had we previously been aware of them, such consequences might have been prevented.

The case is precisely similar in the investigation of our spiritual state and character. That it is accompanied with many, and by no means slender dif-

difficulties, will be denied by no person who has carefully studied, and who understands the subject. Nor is the danger of self-delusion in such an inquiry, a thing little to be dreaded. On the contrary, we cannot be too solicitous to shun it, and to arrive at the true knowledge of ourselves. Prior, therefore, to laying down rules for self-examination, it will be necessary, my reader, to call your attention to the principal of those obstructions which stand in your way, and to show you how you may guard against their deceptive and ruinous influence.

1. A very common difficulty arises from the want of scriptural and clear views of what constitute genuine evidences of Christian character.—That the word of God furnishes us with tests of Christian character, can be denied by none. And that these tests, when properly understood, may be relied on as decisive and infallible, is equally incontrovertible. Dictated as this sacred volume is by the Spirit of God, all its marks of godliness, like their author, are free from imperfection; and are entitled to our unlimited and unsuspecting confidence. Nor are these marks either few in number, or darkly and ambiguously expressed. On the contrary, they are so incorporated with almost every portion of this book, that scarcely can we read a page of it, without meeting with some of them; and, for the most part, they are so plainly, though concisely, delineated, that with a competent measure of religious knowledge, and careful attention, they can scarcely be misapprehended. And their abundant variety furnishes every man with ample scope for investigating his religious character. He who is doubtful on one point, is here provided with the means of trying

himself by others, which may be still more adapted to his case and circumstances, or more level to his comprehension.

But transcendently excellent as this standard of character is, and suited to point out the real condition of every son of Adam with infallible accuracy, too many who have access to it, and who profess to believe its divine authority, are but little acquainted with its contents. They may possess some knowledge of its principal historical facts, and a few of its leading doctrines; but with its descriptions of Christian character and genuine godliness, they have a very limited and imperfect acquaintance. Indeed, so indistinct and confused are their ideas on this point, all-important though it be, that were they requested to state plainly a few of its scriptural criteria, they would be compelled to admit their ignorance of these very things which belong to their peace.—Nor is this the case with those only who are illiterate, and who possess little information on any subject. So far from this, it is characteristic of many who have received a liberal education, and whose knowledge of science and business is extensive and accurate. They know almost every thing, except that which above all they ought to know. They cannot specify, from this volume, what are the discriminating and distinctive features of a child of God.

Now, it is obvious that while this is the case with any man,—while he is destitute of scriptural and clear views of what constitute genuine evidences of Christian character,—it is impossible for him to judge favourably of his spiritual state, and to know that his decision is well grounded. Apart from the word of God, he can have no safe foundation of hope

for eternity. This book, and this alone, contains the only sure tests of piety. But these must be understood before they can be rightly applied. Without this no real benefit can be derived from them. On the contrary, they may be perverted to men's hurt.—With these marks, therefore, every professing Christian should endeavour to be well acquainted. By comparing scripture with scripture,—by consulting the best commentators and approved practical writers,—and by conversing with aged and well-informed Christians, this important knowledge may be acquired. And, in this study, the candid and sincere inquirer may obtain some assistance, by attentively consulting, not only the *contrasts* of the false marks, in Chapter Fourth; but chiefly the genuine evidences, in Chapter Fifth of this treatise.

2. Another difficulty is, the imposing similarity between true grace, and its counterfeits.—That there is an essential difference between every Christian grace, and its counterfeit, how deceptive soever the resemblance may be, is readily granted. In their origin, nature, and effects, they are widely, and unalterably different. Nevertheless, in several respects there is a similarity between them, which is exceedingly imposing, and by which multitudes are deceived,—a similarity, the spuriousness of which cannot be detected, without a considerable acquaintance with divine truth. As counterfeit coin may bear such a near likeness to the sterling currency of the realm, that none except those who are daily conversant with money, may be able to distinguish the true from the false; so it is with respect to the graces of the Christian life, and their mere similitudes. The resemblance between the genuine and the spurious,

in many cases, is so deceiving, that nothing can enable any person to point out their difference, except a clear knowledge of the characteristic features of both. On this account it is necessary, that all who would judge accurately of their spiritual state, and be fully satisfied that they are not deluding themselves, by trusting in the shadow instead of the substance, should diligently study the marks of the former, as well as of the latter.

By carefully and diligently examining this subject, it will be found, that scarcely is there a single grace, or feature of the Christian life, which has not some counterfeit resemblance. There is a sorrow for sin which worketh death, as well as a godly sorrow which worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of. There is a forsaking of sin which is indicative of no change of heart, as well as that which flows from gracious principles. There is a strict observance of religious duties, which is quite compatible with the secret love and practice of iniquity. There is a love to the people of God,—to the word and ordinances of God,—and to the Lord Jesus Christ, which possesses not one grain of true godliness. And there are high and confident hopes of eternal life, which shall issue in disappointment, shame, and sorrow. This, therefore, proves a source of numerous difficulties, in judging our religious state; and of difficulties which delude many formalists, and discourage many saints. Those who have nothing more but the profession, and the semblance, of godliness, are thus frequently induced to conclude that they are certainly the children of God. And these, who are truly possessed of gracious principles, often are deeply distressed with the dread, that they are de-

ceiving themselves with the counterfeit, instead of the genuine. To assist persons of both classes, in distinguishing the former from the latter, is the design of Chapter Fourth.

3. The partiality of self-love naturally inclines all men to judge too favourably of themselves.—Self-love is that instinctive principle which impels every man to value, and to endeavour to promote, his own happiness. For wise purposes God has so inwrought it with our natures, that in almost every action, secular or religious, it operates as a powerful incentive. And much as it is ignorantly decried by some, as if its existence were inconsistent with genuine piety; under proper regulations its exercise is not only lawful, but highly necessary and commendable.

But in fallen and depraved creatures, such as we are, this principle has a natural tendency to lead us to partial views of our own conduct, and consequently to self-deception. Under its predominating influence no man can form an impartial estimate of his own actions and character. He extenuates his faults and transgressions into harmless frailties; or, at least, regards them stamped with much less guilt than they really are. And what he accounts good and praiseworthy, he magnifies greatly beyond the truth. Forbidden indulgences he views as unavoidable imperfections; and habits of vice as if they were only occasional acts, and rare and casual slips. And the performance of any religious duty, seldom though it may occur, is complacently contemplated as if it were a fixed and habitual feature of practice.

It is from this principle that mankind generally are so prone to extenuate, or excuse, the vices of their particular station; while they fondly congratu-

late themselves on their freedom from other vices, which they are under no temptation to commit. They feel the influence of these temptations to which they themselves are exposed, and how difficult it is to resist them; and, therefore, when they yield to them, conceive that they have peculiar apologies for their deviations from firm and unbending uprightness, which every one must perceive as clearly as they themselves do, and ought to be equally ready to sustain. But ignorant as they are of the inducements which draw those aside from the straight line of duty, who occupy a different sphere, and are engaged in other pursuits, they can make no allowance for their errors. On the contrary, they appear to them deeply aggravated and inexcusable. They reflect not, that had they been placed in the circumstances of their neighbour, and surrounded with his temptations, they might have gone much farther astray than he has done; and that though they are exempted from his faults, it is because they are under no allurements to their commission. "They behold the mote that is in their brother's eye, but consider not the beam which is in their own eye." Consequently, they are much pleased with themselves, because their own offences appear so very excusable, and because they are free from those of others, which, in their reckoning, are so enormously great.

Nothing can effectually hinder the undue influence of this principle, when men sit in judgment on their own character, except the illuminating and soul-humbling operation of divine grace. And even this, in the present imperfect state, does not always sufficiently counteract its self-flattering tendency.

The best of men are sometimes disposed by it, to decide too favourably in their own cause. In every instance, therefore, in which we engage in this important work, there is much need to guard against this source of deception; and to endeavour to pass sentence on ourselves with all possible impartiality. Rather, however, let us exercise such a holy jealousy over our deceitful hearts, as will incline us to the side of severity against ourselves, than lean to the opposite side of self-favouring. Let us look as much at our faults, as we do at what is commendable.*

4. Good men frequently run into the opposite extreme, and, from timorous and humble diffidence, refuse to apply to themselves, what is truly characteristic of their state.—Though persons of this description are not completely freed from the undue workings of selflove, and sometimes are too partial to themselves; yet this is far from being the case with any of them habitually. On the contrary, most commonly they go into the opposite extreme, and are too backward to claim that comfort to which they are graciously entitled. This arises from these self-humbling views of themselves, which they have received under the efficacious teaching of the word and Spirit of God. The supernatural illumination thus poured into their minds, discovers to them so clearly and affectingly the corruptions of their heart, and the enormity and aggravations of their sins of practice, that they possess a lowly and self-condemning estimate of all they are, and of all they have done. Like the patriarch Job, each of them says of himself, “ Behold, I am vile!—If I wash myself with snow-water, and make my hands ever so clean ;

* See Chapter III., part second, section 4.

yet shalt thou plunge me in the ditch, and mine own clothes shall abhor me.—I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Filled thus with self-abasing views of themselves, they can scarcely think it possible that sinners such as they are, may claim the exalted title, and glorious immunities, of sons of God. Though there is nothing which they more highly value, and to secure which they would be willing to make greater sacrifices; yet, so humbled and distressed are they with an abiding sense of their guilt and defilement, that they can hardly persuade themselves that they are really in a gracious state. When plain marks and evidences of this attainment are propounded to their consideration, which are truly characteristic of their own principles and practice; they regard them as descriptive of others, but are afraid to apply them to themselves. Some objection or other is urged by them, as a reason why they cannot, or ought not, to consider such unspeakably important attainments assuredly their own. They dread the idea of presumption, and self-deception; and to avoid them, run to the opposite extreme, by rejecting what belongs to them, and consequently deprive themselves of “joy and peace in believing.” Thus, the weakness of their faith, and the strength of their doubts and fears, prove a hinderance to just views of their character, and subject them to much disquietude.

This is an amiable feature of character,—a feature which God himself beholds with approbation. “Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place; but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at

my word."* And yet, lovely as it is, sometimes it is carried to a hurtful extreme. Those whom it characterises ought to guard against dishonouring the Spirit of God, by denying his work in their soul; and by rejecting that comfort which he has provided for them. They ought to beware lest, in shunning presumption, they indulge in unbelief.

5. Diversity of natural temper, and the effects of early education and habits, constitute another difficulty in judging our spiritual state.—Almost every man has something peculiar to himself, in the temperament of his dispositions, and the character and bias of his habits. Whether this arises from any original difference, in the formation of the body and mind, or from early training, the fact itself is certain. Some are naturally haughty and scornful, while others are condescending and humble. Some are surly and turbulent, while others are mild and conciliating. Some are fiery and irascible, and easily kindled into a flame of passion, while others are more cool and self-possessed. Some are tender-hearted and compassionate, and soon melted into pity by the tale of woe, while others are unfeeling and obdurate. Some are lively and cheerful, while others are morose and gloomy. Some are unforgiving and revengeful, and can hardly be reconciled to those who once offend them, while others are readily pacified and softened into forgiveness.

Amid all these and many other varieties of natural disposition, we are not to expect that the grace of God will, in every one of them, produce exactly the same effects. Though they are the same in *kind*, or quality; yet, in cases so different, they are far, very

* Isa. lxvi. 1, 2.

far, from being the same in *degree*. Nor could it be so, unless either the soul itself were taken away, and a new one implanted in regeneration; or the change thus produced were at first complete. Neither of these, however, is the case. The mind, though renewed by grace, is not a totally new mind; and the change effected, though it extends to all its powers and faculties, is in none of them at first perfect.

On these accounts, it is obvious, that the renovating and sanctifying operations of divine grace, must produce effects exceedingly various, in persons so widely different from each other in their natural character and habits. With respect to those whose tempers are naturally mild and amiable, and their outward practice correct, the change must be little apparent. But where the contrary is the case, it will be conspicuously visible. And yet when all this is admitted, it would be too much to expect that the latter should equal the former. The haughty and scornful, the surly and turbulent, the irascible and fiery, the unfeeling and obdurate, the morose and gloomy, and the unforgiving and revengeful, seldom, if indeed ever, become as distinguished for the opposite dispositions, as those converts to whom they naturally belonged. Great as the transformation is which grace accomplishes, somewhat of the old leaven remains with them, while they are clothed with mortality; and sometimes discovers itself to their shame and sorrow.

Forgetful of all this, many genuine saints give themselves much uneasiness. They whose dispositions and conduct, from their early youth, have been mild and irreproachable, and who have been accustomed to observe all the duties of religion, before

they were made the subjects of grace, are often distressed because they cannot trace in themselves a change so *great* and *remarkable*, as they conclude they might do, were they truly the children of God. And, on the other hand, they whose tempers and practice have been most offensive and hateful, till they had arrived to maturity, after they are renewed by the Spirit of God, are often greatly troubled because the change is not *complete*; and view the remainders of their former character, as incompatible with a gracious state. Whereas, in both cases, much allowance must be made for the effects of natural character, and of habits which had long been cherished.

6. Another difficulty in judging our spiritual state arises from our proneness to look at outward actions, without regarding the motives from which they proceed; and our inability, in many instances, to ascertain what our motives were.—In estimating the religious character of others, we must necessarily confine ourselves to their external conduct. Impossible as it is for us to enter into the secret springs of their actions, and to know the motives by which they are influenced, we have nothing else from which we can reason, except their language and outward deportment. Hence it is that we are so frequently deceived in our judgment respecting the character of others.

But in trying our own spiritual state, we ought to proceed in a very different manner. Though we are not to overlook our external actions; yet we must not confine our views to what is merely outward. On the contrary, we ought always to look chiefly at the dispositions, principles, and motives by which we

have been actuated in their performance. These, according as they are good or bad, stamp any deed, supposed to be virtuous, with piety or wickedness, in the estimation of God. How praiseworthy soever any action may be in itself, when it originates from unworthy and sinful aims and designs, it cannot be approved by the heart-searching Jehovah. "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."* The prayers, and fastings, and alms of the Pharisees were unquestionably good in themselves; but, springing, as they did, from vain-glorious and sinister motives, he who knew what is in man, again and again pronounced them "hypocrites."

To ascertain the motives of our actions, in many instances is far from being easy. Though it may not be so difficult in regard to those which we are presently performing, or which are but very recent; yet it is far otherwise with those which are long ago past. In this case, while we distinctly remember the actions themselves, it is scarcely possible that we can recollect what was then the state of our mind, and how we were influenced and incited. And yet this is in some degree necessary, when we take into our account those deeds of former days, on which we may be disposed to look with complacency, and from them to judge favourably of our state. On this account, we ought not to rest our judgment of our character wholly, or even chiefly, on the pious actions of years which are past.

Nor is it so easy, as some imagine, to know accurately the principles and motives even of our present conduct. Very frequently, if not always, they

* 1 Sam. xvi. 7.

are of a mixed character. The most eminent saints, who in the main are enabled to aim at the glory of God, and their own advancement in holiness, too often mingle with these some portion of earthly, carnal, and polluting alloy. And so large may that portion of debasing mixture sometimes be, that it may be doubtful whether it does not preponderate over their better and gracious aims.—In all cases, therefore, much, very much, depends on the *habitual tendency* of our motives. From this chiefly, rather than from single and particular instances, we may infer the true character of our religious actions.

7. The smallness of their grace, and the many imperfections of their character, render this inquiry very difficult to many true Christians.—That some of the children of God reach to high attainments in holiness, even in this imperfect state, is undeniable. Few though their number be, there are distinguished individuals occasionally to be met with, who have advanced far in conformity to the image of Christ. Like Noah and Job, of whom it is testified by the Spirit of God that they were *perfect*, they have arrived to comparative perfection,—perfection compared with what they themselves formerly were, and with what is the condition of the generality of true Christians around them. Persons thus highly favoured, notwithstanding some remaining imperfections, to a great degree are freed from the difficulty to which we are now adverting; and may more easily discern in themselves the characteristics of true godliness.

But with the great majority of genuine saints, it is far otherwise. The state of religion in their soul is very imperfect. Their knowledge of divine truth

is often narrow and indistinct; their graces are weak; and their practice is too frequently unsteady and defective. In all such cases, who does not see that it must be difficult to perceive the evidence of godliness? Small objects cannot easily be discerned. Grace, which is like a grain of mustard seed, can scarcely be noticed.—But, besides the smallness of their grace, it is often mingled with much that is to be condemned. Exposed as they all are to numerous, and sometimes powerful temptations without; and harassed with struggling corruptions within; their spiritual enemies too often obtain partial victories over them. Every day iniquity in some shape prevails against them. Duty is sometimes neglected, or coldly and carelessly performed. Unholy, or at best, worldly thoughts and imaginations are indulged,—the anxious cares of secular business, disturb and unfit the mind for spiritual exercises,—and their heart and affections cleave to the dust. And sometimes they fall into the commission of known sin; and, it may be, fall foully and disgracefully, and for a considerable period appear as if they were finally abandoned of God. The conduct of David and Solomon, and other saints mentioned in the sacred volume, sufficiently attests this painful and humbling truth. And the biographical accounts of good men who have lived in more recent times, and who themselves have communicated to the world faithful narratives of their general conduct and experience, amply prove their manifold imperfections and sins. The very best of them often adopt the Psalmist's language,—“Innumerable evils have compassed me about; mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up: they

are more than the hairs of mine head; therefore, my heart faileth me.”* Nor need we wonder at this, when we hear the most distinguished follower of the Lamb, who ever lived, thus speaking of himself,—“The good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin, which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”†

This imperfect state of piety, common as it is among Christians, must render it difficult for them clearly and plainly to see their character, and to decide without hesitation respecting their spiritual state; and, in proportion to the degree in which this imperfection exists, must this difficulty be increased. Were saints on earth perfect in holiness, they would find no difficulty in knowing their character, any more than saints in heaven. Where there is nothing but light, all must be clearly seen. But where light is mixed with darkness, as in the faint twilight, objects are beheld with a degree of obscurity and uncertainty. Since this is the case with too many believers in Christ,—since much darkness mingles with their light, much sin with their holiness,—in the nature of things, while it continues thus, it must be difficult, if not impossible, for them to obtain clear and satisfactory evidence of their piety. First they must reach a higher degree of conformity to the image of Christ. The seed of

* Psal. xl. 12.

† Rom. vii. 19–24.

grace must grow above surrounding weeds, before the blade and corn in the ear can be seen.

8. Seasons of spiritual darkness and desertion, prove another source of difficulty.—No child of God is continually favoured with the light of his Father's countenance, and the sensible experience of the joys of his salvation. In this respect there is, no doubt, great diversity. Some obtain a more abundant and more steady sense of the love of God shed abroad in their hearts, than falls to the share of others. But the very best of them is subjected to changes. Each of them has his seasons of darkness, as well as of light,—and of spiritual sorrow, as well as of comfort. If at one time we meet with them filled with peace, animated with hope, and “going on their way rejoicing;” at another we find them cast down and disquieted. One of them we hear exclaiming, “Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; when his candle shined upon my head, and when by his light I walked through darkness. O that I knew where I might find him! Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him.”* Another in the bitterness of his heart cries out, “Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?”† And another of them in deep distress of soul is found inquiring, “Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?”‡

* Job xxix. 2, 3; xxiii. 8, 9. † Psal. lxxxviii. 14. ‡ Psal. lxxvii. 7.—9.

The causes why God thus deals with his children, are without doubt various. Sometimes he may thus visit them with a view to try their graces, to exercise and improve them, and to manifest, to the confusion of their enemies, the power of his Spirit in supporting them under their deepest distress. But principally his design is to chasten them for some particular sin, or course of sinning,—to bring them to a proper sense of their guilt,—to produce in them a thorough hatred of iniquity,—to excite them to greater watchfulness, and humble dependence,—and to make them more diligent in their observance of his commandments. Indeed, in all cases of this nature, their sins, either more immediately or remotely, are the procuring cause of such visitations. Every time they are deprived of spiritual comfort, and encompassed with clouds and darkness, the language of the prophet may be applied to them; “your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you.”*

In such circumstances it is impossible for the children of God to judge favourably of their state and prospects for eternity. Though usually they are then more deeply concerned about their salvation, and more solicitous to perceive their gracious evidences, than on almost any other occasion; yet at such a time they are least qualified to make an impartial investigation, and to pass a just decision. So far from this, they view everything in the most unfavourable light. They raze foundations, and look on their past experience as mere delusion. They write bitter things against themselves; and hastily conclude, that their darkness

* Isa. lix. 2.

shall never be exchanged for the light of their Father's face.

No child of God can with clearness discern his state and character, during such dark and uncomfortable seasons. His employment ought to be, to lay open and to search out his spiritual complaint. Let him endeavour to ascertain the cause of his present distress,—let him humbly confess, and with contrite spirit mourn over his trespass before the Lord,—and let him wrestle in prayer for renewed intimations of forgiveness, the light of his heavenly Father's countenance, and assistance to walk thenceforth in newness of heart and practice. And when the cause of his disquietude has been removed, then, but not till then, can he expect to examine impartially the evidences of his spiritual state.

9. Another cause of difficulty springs from the temptations of Satan.—That the people of God are exposed to the fiery assaults of this crafty and malignant adversary, is not, as some represent it, a matter of mere superstitious fancy. It is a painful certainty, attested alike by the word of God, and the experience of saints in every age and country. In reference to this fact, Paul thus exhorts believers at Ephesus,—“ Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits, in high concerns.”* To the same purpose Peter addresses the persecuted followers of Christ,—“ Be sober, be vigilant; because

* Eph. vi. 10—12.

your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."* And in unison with the voice of inspiration has ever been the testimony of God's people, whether we consult their written memoirs, or listen to their verbal declarations. All of them have felt, in a less or greater degree, the bitter enmity of this arch-foe; and been made to endure much disquietude and alarm from his suggestions.

When Satan, and his powers of darkness, are thus permitted to try the people of God for their chastisement and improvement, though certain that they cannot pluck one of them out of the Redeemer's hand, and effect his eternal ruin; yet they do all in their power to strip them of their comfort, and to distract them with terrors. By numberless artifices they endeavour to drive them to doubts and despair;—to disbelieve the reality of their religious experience,—to view their sins as too great to be pardoned,—to conclude that they are not of the number of the elect,—to entertain unholy and blasphemous thoughts,—or to question the inspiration of the Bible, and the very existence of God.—But wisely ordered, for their spiritual profit, as such fiery trials are; and certain as it is that "God will not suffer any of them to be tempted above what they are able to bear, and in due time will make a way for their escape;" yet, while under them, such considerations can afford them no comfort. Incapable, as they usually then are, of tracing in themselves any feature of God's children, they refuse to be comforted.

* 1 Pet. v. 8, 9.

A moment's reflection must show, how impracticable it would be for any Christian, in such circumstances, to judge impartially concerning his character; and how improper, therefore, it would then be for him to make the attempt. Instead of unprofitably perplexing themselves with self-examination, all who are under distressing temptation, ought importunately and incessantly to cry to God for support and deliverance. By patiently waiting on the Lord in the frequent perusal of his word, regular attendance on the public ordinances of religion, and fervent and persevering secret prayer; he will, sooner or latter, accomplish their release, and give each of them cause to join with the Psalmist in thus praising his name;—"He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters. He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from them who hated me; for they were too strong for me."*

10. The last difficulty to which I shall advert, is a state of melancholy.—This consists in a gloomy frame of mind, filled with dark forebodings, and commonly arising from bodily distempers. The soul and body are so closely united, and so mutually dependent, that the one can hardly be long subjected to suffering, and the other remain unaffected. When the mind is deeply distressed, soon does it impair the health of the body. And when the body is disordered by latent and lingering maladies, it cannot fail to have some influence on the temper, affections, and operations of the mind. Often do the distempers of the body unfit the mind for its accustomed exertions, fill it with gloomy apprehensions, and incline it to brood over dejected and desponding views and anticipations, till it settle in a fixed melancholy.

* Psal. xviii. 16, 17.

When this is the case with any person who is piously disposed, the gloom of his mind will soon affect, in some degree, all his religious meditations, hopes, and experience. Like a person whose eye is jaundiced, and to whom all objects appear tinged with a yellow hue,—every subject to which he directs his attention, will be seen through a distempered medium, and will assume a cloudy aspect. Then, in his estimation, every thing seems to be against him. All the denunciations of divine wrath, mentioned in the Bible, appear pointed at him. No promise, or invitation of the gospel, can apply to this case. Every dispensation of providence, and almost every word and action of those around him, appear intended for his hurt, and remind him of his awful doom. His incessant complaint is, that God has for ever cast him off,—that Satan has obtained power over him, or perhaps already taken possession of him,—and that soon, by some visible and terrible judgment, he must everlastingly perish.

It were absurd to suppose that any child of God, under such melancholy, could form an accurate estimate of his religious character. Even though the degree of this disease should be less than we have supposed, it must have a perverting influence on his judgment, and unavoidably induce him to decide against himself.—All who are in this distressing condition, therefore, ought, by early rising, plain nourishment, much exercise in the open air, and cheerful society, to seek after the improvement of their bodily health. And, while they slight not the prescriptions of their earthly physician, above all let them have recourse to Jesus, the physician of souls. Let them think much of his amiable character,—of his coming to seek and to save that which is lost,—

of his inviting all without exception to come to him, and assuring them, that “him who cometh, he will in no wise cast out;”—and, instead of brooding over their miseries, let them listen to his gracious call, and cry to him to heal their wounded spirit,—“to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”*

Thus I have endeavoured briefly to set before you, several of the difficulties which lie in the way of your forming an impartial and just estimate of your religious character. Some of them, it is true, are to be met with only occasionally, particularly the last three. But there are others of them with which all must struggle; and which continually have a tendency to lead the unregenerate to judge favourably of their state, while they frequently hinder genuine believers from perceiving clearly and satisfactorily their gracious evidences.—Beware of either treating them lightly, as if they were unworthy of your notice; or of being discouraged by them from making any attempt to ascertain your present standing, in the view of death and eternity. Study to obviate those of them, to which, in some measure, you may rise superior, by increasing acquaintance with the word of God, and by circumspection and activity in the way of holiness. And fervently implore the illumination and guidance of the Spirit of all truth, that none of these difficulties may draw you into self-deception; but that you may be enabled to arrive at the true knowledge of what you are, in the reckoning of the omniscient Jehovah.—To aid you in this important inquiry, I shall endeavour to give you a few plain directions in the following Chapter.

* Isa. lxi. 3.

CHAPTER III.

DIRECTIONS FOR SELF-EXAMINATION.

Directions to be observed preparatory to self-examination. 1. You must seriously view it both as your duty, and your interest.—2. You must be persuaded that, though difficult, it is practicable.—3. You ought to fix on suitable scripture marks of Christian character, that you may have them ready for your assistance.—4. You should choose a proper time.—5. You should go to a suitable place of retirement.—Directions respecting the manner in which this duty should be performed: 1. This exercise should be commenced with a deep sense of your inability to perform it aright, and with prayer for the assistance of the Spirit of God.—2. It should be executed with much care and diligence.—3. With patient deliberation.—4. With all possible impartiality.—5. Repeatedly.—6. The word of God must be the standard of trial.—7. Throughout the whole process you must look up for the aids of the Spirit of God, and act as in his presence.

IN attempting to assist you in an undertaking of such magnitude and difficulty, I shall lay down a few plain and practical directions,—some of them preparatory to self-examination, and others relating to the manner in which it should be observed.

1. Before you can profitably engage in self-examination, you must seriously view it both as your duty, and your interest.—If it be not your duty, then the neglect of it cannot be offensive to God. But if it be sanctioned by the authority of his word, your disregard of it must expose you to his righteous displeasure. That God has explicitly and repeatedly commanded you to sit in judgment on your own

spiritual state, and, by a minute, and impartial investigation of your heart and life, to endeavour to ascertain whether you really are, or are not, a believer in Christ, has already been proved. The language of his word is,—“Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates.”* “If any man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.”†

Nor is it less your interest, than it is your duty. It lies at the very foundation of your safety and comfort. Without observing it, and observing it aright, for aught you can know to the contrary, you may, notwithstanding your religious profession, be living in the most dangerous self-delusion. For want of it thousands are lulled into fatal security. By practising this duty, if you are indeed the children of God, you will experience the peace and joy arising from the knowledge of this; and be excited to give him the glory of what he has done for you, and wrought in you. But if, on the contrary, you be deceiving yourself, the sooner you are apprized of this the better; and it is only by careful self-scrutiny, that you can be apprized of this dangerous error.

2. Before you engage in self-examination, you ought to be persuaded that, difficult though it be, it is notwithstanding practicable.—That it is attended with many difficulties, and some of them truly formidable, has already been shown. But though this work be far from being so easy as some represent

* 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

† Gal. vi. 3, 4.

it; yet, blessed be God, it is not beyond the reach of any man who sincerely, and diligently, and in a proper manner, addresses himself to its performance. Were it a thing impossible for any person, or even for the majority of mankind, who are favoured with the sacred volume, to arrive at the true knowledge of their religious character, it would be useless to make the attempt. Were this the case, where would be the propriety of enjoining self-examination as a duty, and of promising advantage from its careful observance? The very fact that every man is unequivocally commanded to perform this exercise, and assured that, as the favourable result of it, “then he shall have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another,” is a proof of its practicability. No man could “have rejoicing in himself alone,” or in the testimony of his own conscience, after having made trial of his own work, were he still to remain ignorant of his character.

Besides, no person acquainted with the Bible, can doubt the fact, that it sets before us numerous marks of genuine godliness. It describes the peculiar and characteristic features, both of the righteous and the wicked, in various forms, and in the most explicit terms. But what purpose could these serve, if it be not to enable us to distinguish the former from the latter, and to ascertain to which class we belong? The language of the beloved disciple on this point, speaking not only in his own name, but in that of all believers, is clear and decisive:—“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him: and hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath

given us. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God, that ye may know that ye have eternal life.”*

3. Before you engage in self-examination, you ought to fix on suitable scripture marks of Christian character, that you may have them ready for your assistance.—That many professing Christians do not possess such a stock of knowledge, and particular acquaintance with the sacred volume, as can enable them on any occasion, without assistance, to select and apply to themselves suitable passages for this purpose, will scarcely be denied. A little reflection, therefore, might convince every one of this description, how absurd it would be for him to sit down professedly to try whether he be, or be not, a genuine believer in Christ, without having any definite criterion in view, by which he may determine this important inquiry. Unless he previously fix on the marks by which he is to try himself, and have them ready by him, he may spend the time, allotted for self-examination, in unsuccessfully searching for them; or he may stumble upon those which cannot afford him proper assistance.—If, therefore, you would proceed without confusion, or delay, attend to this plain direction,—always have the materials ready beforehand, by which you may try yourself.

Though the sacred scriptures, at large, are calculated to assist in self-examination; yet there are particular portions of them, obviously better adapted to this end than others. Some of these, therefore, should be carefully selected, marked, and studied. A few passages of this kind are mentioned in the

subjoined note.* And to furnish suitable marks, founded on the word of God, and to assist in their application, is the design of chapter Fifth, in the following pages.

4. You ought to choose a proper time.—Neither the business of the world, nor the state of your mind, makes every time alike suitable for this exercise. Sometimes your secular concerns may have multiplied on your hands, and may press upon you so urgently, that you may have scarcely any leisure, on week days, for its observance. On such occasions also, the mind is commonly too much engrossed with these earthly cares and pursuits, to be easily called away from them a sufficient length of time, to perform profitably and satisfactorily the work of a thorough self-examination. And frequently, from other causes, which either greatly delight or distress the mind, it may be so much agitated, as totally to unfit it for this important and difficult exercise. Every person who has attended to his own feelings, must know this by experience. He must have been conscious, that, on many occasions, he could not command his mind to engage steadily in matters pertaining to the body; and much less in deciding a question relating to the dearest and eternal interests of the soul.

One of your first concerns, therefore, ought to be, to fix on a time when you are freest from the bustle and pressure of worldly engagements; and when your mind is least elated with tempting pleasures, or embarrassed with vexing cares. Particularly you ought to embrace a time, when your soul is seriously

* Mat. v. 3—12.; vi. 13.; John iii. 3—8, 36.; viii. 31, 32.; xiii. 35.; xiv. 21.; Rom. vi. 1—22.; viii. 1—17.; 1 Cor. xlii. 1—7.; 2 Cor. v. 17.; Gal. iv. 6.; v. 22—24.; Eph. ii. 1—5.; iv. 22—24.; 1 Pet. ii. 7.; 1 John i. 5—7.; ii. 3—6.; iii. 10.; iv. 7—11., &c. &c.

impressed with religious thoughts, and with the prospects of death and eternity ; such as, the evening of the Lord's day, or the season of trying afflictions and bereavements.

Of all periods of frequent occurrence, there is none so well adapted for the performance of this duty, as *the evening of the Lord's day*. On this day your hands are freed from ordinary secular occupations. On this day your mind is tranquillized by the general pause from business, and the solemn stillness of all around. On this day, by your attendance on the public ministrations of the gospel, your thoughts are called away from the world, and directed to the concerns of eternity ; and some degree of seriousness and devoutness of spirit is experienced. On this day you can easily command an hour in the evening, to retire by yourself, and to commune with your own heart, as in the sight of the Lord. On the evening of this hallowed day, therefore, you ought to employ some portion of your time in this momentous scrutiny, regarding it a sacred and seasonable opportunity to know your state and prospects for eternity.

Besides, the season when either you yourself, or those who are dear to you, are tried with afflictions, or when death has bereaved you of beloved kindred or acquaintance, is well fitted for the observance of this duty. Such painful allotments of Providence have a tendency to fill the mind with thoughtfulness, —to show the vanity of all sublunary enjoyments, and the necessity of choosing a portion which cannot be lost. When visited with such trials, therefore, regard them as the voice of Heaven addressing you,

“ Now, thus saith the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways.”*

5. You ought to seek a suitable place of retirement.—Our blessed Lord requires his disciples to observe this rule, in performing the duty of secret prayer: “ But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”† He instructs them to observe this secrecy, not only in opposition to the proud ostentation of the Pharisees; but chiefly for their own advantage,—to guard them against the noise and interruptions to which they might be exposed. The same reasons for retirement and seclusion from society, apply with equal, or even with greater force, to the duty of self-examination. We may mentally engage in secret prayer, in the midst of our family; but it would scarcely be practicable for us there to examine our spiritual state. This requires both much tranquillity, and patient and repeated trial; and consequently, both privacy and considerable length of time.

Every person who has made the attempt, knows, how difficult it is to keep the mind long fixed in self-examination, even in the most quiet and retired situation. How much more difficult must it be, amid the noise and bustle of a family? Every word which is spoken, and every action or little incident which takes place, must be apt to disturb the thoughts, and to prevent their steady and vigorous application. The mind unavoidably must be less or more occupied, with what engages the eye, or the ear. For any person, therefore, to attempt this duty, in such

* Hag. i. 5.

† Mat. vi. 6.

circumstances, is highly improper.—*Let me suppose* that any of you had a piece of business to accomplish, on which much of your worldly interests depended. Would you deem it sufficient to employ a little time for its execution, while your mind was occupied with other inferior engagements, or apt to be disturbed by the different speeches and labours of those around? Rather, would you not seek a place, where for a time, with calm deliberation, you might direct to it your undivided attention? The application is obvious.—It must be of great advantage, therefore, that you perform this duty in a place of retirement, where, as much as possible, you may be free from all external annoyance.

Having thus called your attention to these directions, preparatory to self-examination, I shall now endeavour to point out *the manner* in which this duty should be performed.

1. This exercise should always be commenced with a deep sense of your inability to perform it aright, without the aid of the Spirit of God; and with fervent prayer for his assistance.—Without the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can perform no duty, in a way acceptable to God, and beneficial to ourselves. On this account we are expressly commanded not to attempt any one of them, in our own strength; but to look up to God for his promised aid in every step of duty. “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” “In every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.”* If this be incumbent

* Prov. iii. 5, 6.; Phil. iv. 6.

in every duty, in a peculiar manner it must be so, in those which are specially important and difficult. Of this kind is the work of self-examination. There is not a religious exercise in which we can engage, in which we are in such hazard of deceiving ourselves, and in which self-deception may be attended with such dangerous consequences. A mistake here, as it relates to our entire character and prospects for eternity, may soothe us into a fatal security, and make us dream of peace, till we awake in everlasting misery.

Accordingly we find that the people of God, in all ages, have cherished a deep sense of the difficulty attending self-examination; and, when about to observe it, have implored the assistance of the Spirit of God. The psalmist, David, when he looked into his heart, was constrained to exclaim before the Lord,—“Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults.” “Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my reins and my heart.” “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”* After all his endeavours to examine himself, to know his errors and secret faults, and to become acquainted with the plagues of his heart, he humbly confesses, that the omniscient Jehovah alone could effectually aid him in this search, and therefore earnestly supplicates his assistance.—The prophet Jeremiah manifested a similar spirit, when he thus expressed himself, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every

* Psal. xix. 12; xxvi. 2; cxxxix. 23, 24.

man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”*

If such were the sentiments of these eminently wise and holy men,—these prophets of the Lord,—if they were compelled to admit the matchless deceitfulness of the heart, and their inability to know it aright, without divine aid; much more does it become us to be impressed with the difficulties of this work, and our need of supernatural direction. And if they fervently besought the help of God, that they might be preserved from self-delusion; much more do we require ardently to implore that we may be kept from this ruinous danger.—As soon, therefore, as you enter the place where you intend to engage in self-examination, bow the knee to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and beseech him by his Spirit to shine into your heart, and to enable you, by means of his word, to see what you truly are in his estimation. Fervently cry to him that he would make you willing to know the *worst*, as well as the *best*, of your state and character; and that he would effectually undeceive you, if you are deceiving yourself. Or, if indeed he has begun a good work in you, though grace should be small and weak, humbly beg that he would enable you to discern it; and impart to you that peace and joy which flow from a well grounded interest in his love.

2. This duty should be performed with much care and diligence.—There is cause to fear that many who attempt something like self-examination, do it simply as a matter of form, and to quiet the remonstrances of conscience. They know that it is their commanded duty; and especially they are aware that it

* Jer. xvii. 9, 10.

is required of them, when they have the near prospect of commemorating the death of Christ; and therefore they cannot satisfy themselves without doing something of this nature. Very little, however, is sufficient to silence their conscience, and to pass for an endeavour to examine themselves. If they look back at a few of the most striking actions and incidents of life, and read a passage or two of the Bible, or of some other religious book; they conceive that nothing more is requisite. They cannot take the trouble to investigate their heart and practice minutely; and to compare them with a considerable number of scripture tests of godliness. Such a conduct betrays a want of true concern about the state of the soul; and, in no instance in which the outward conduct is decent and irreproachable, can be followed by a convincing and humbling detection of sin.

If you would be successful in judging yourself, you must bring your whole mind and soul to this important trial, and go through it with all the care and diligence which you can command. Viewing yourself as in the presence of your omniscient Judge, and impressed with the belief that to him you must soon account for every thought, and word, and deed; you must commence this work with a fixed determination, to spare no pains that you may arrive at the truth. And as you proceed to try yourself by any mark of character, whether it be indicative of a gracious, or of a graceless state, study to view it in all its various aspects and bearings, both as it relates to your principles and your practice. After you have come, if possible, to some convincing decision on one point of inquiry, then proceed to investigate another, with similar care and diligence; and so on in succes-

sion, till you have applied, to your heart and life, a number sufficient to prevent mistake. Thus, and thus alone, you will show that you are in good earnest,—that you are persuaded that this trial is both difficult and important,—and that you are resolved to know on what ground you stand, in the prospect of death, judgment, and eternity.

3. You should perform this duty with patient deliberation.—This is of vast importance to your success. On this account, though in some degree it is necessarily involved in the former particular, I have chosen to give it a separate and distinct specification. Should you limit yourself to a few minutes, in the view of laying aside your inquiry, as soon as they are elapsed; it is scarcely possible that you can succeed. Almost unavoidably you will be in danger of circumscribing your trial to one or two things at most, and of omitting many points essential to a satisfactory and just decision. Or should you run quickly over a great number of marks of character, in so little time; from the nature of such an investigation, it is impracticable to see any of them clearly, unless you be either eminent for holiness or impiety.

You ought to set it down as an established and incontrovertible rule, that in self-examination, as in every other difficult and important inquiry, patient deliberation is necessary. A rash and hasty judgment, in such a case, is generally faulty, and always hazardous and imprudent. Sufficient time must be devoted to it. How difficult soever it may be to command an hour for this purpose, you ought to set yourself on its attainment. An hour is readily found by almost every one, who has something of a worldly nature in view, accounted either entertaining or ad-

vantageous. And can you find time to attend to matters pertaining to the body, or to the trifling amusement of the mind, while you cannot take from the world an hour, to inquire whether you are going to heaven or hell? Far be an inconsistency so palpable from you! Blush at the very thought! Rather than want sufficient time for a business in which you are so deeply concerned,—a business of such superlative magnitude, take it from the season usually allotted for sleep.

When you have set apart a suitable and sufficient portion of time for this purpose, let it be conscientiously devoted to it. Do not, if possible, appropriate it to any thing else, or allow intruding cares, and vain imaginations, to occupy its greater part. When disturbed by them, cry to the Lord for deliverance. And, when you find it difficult to decide on any point of trial, guard against impatience. With calm deliberation, endeavour to keep your mind to this work, till you can appeal to God, that you have not willingly trifled in it, nor hurried it past.

4. You should examine yourself with all possible impartiality.—This is the most difficult part of self-examination. Many circumstances, as was formerly shown, contribute to render it often deeply perplexing, and have a tendency to lead to self-deception. But difficult though it be, you have cause to bless God that it is practicable; and, that by pursuing the proper course, you may be guarded against the misleading influence of every thing which has a tendency to bias your judgment, and may arrive at the true knowledge of your character. To assist you in this, the following observations, carefully attended to, may be found of advantage.

Come to this important trial with a mind unbiassed, and open to conviction.—If you have already prejudged the case, whether it be for or against yourself, and have your mind filled with prepossessions it will scarcely be possible for you to make an impartial investigation. In this case, you have already determined what shall be your decision, and every thing which favours it will be grasped at with avidity; whereas, whatever is opposed to it, will be viewed with a jealous eye, and, if not rejected, will be with difficulty admitted. As much as practicable, therefore, you ought to commence this search after your real state, as if you knew nothing about it, and were to form your judgment wholly from the evidence which you were about to examine. To this evidence your attention must be entirely directed, and from it your decision must arise. And when any biasing prejudices come before your mind, you must instantly endeavour to set them aside.

Never form your estimate of your state before God, by comparing your character with that of others around you.—This is a common, and a most fallacious practice. Instead of trying themselves by the perfect standard of the word of God, many have recourse to the erring test of what is done by their neighbours. They institute a comparison between their own conduct, and that of some others who have a Christian profession; and they conclude that, without partiality to themselves, they are at least as good, if not somewhat better. In this case too, it is usual to make the comparison between themselves, and not the most pious, but some whose conduct is obviously faulty. And yet, when they have nothing more to trust in, but this, they are pleased with their attain-

ments. The language of an apostle respecting this practice is,—“ We dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”*—If you wish to judge impartially of yourself, guard against this practice. Try your character by those tests which God has given you in the sacred scriptures; and seek not for others which are lower, and accommodated to the depraved heart, but calculated to deceive.

Besides, to judge impartially of your spiritual state, you must look, not simply at one feature or two of your conduct, but at its general tenor for some time back.—If you circumscribe your inquiry to such narrow ground, as embraces only a few particular actions of life, whether they be good or bad, it is scarcely possible that your decision can be correct. The conduct of no man is all of a piece. The worst of men sometimes perform actions, in themselves highly commendable. And among the best of men, where shall we find one, who has not sometimes acted contrary to conscience, and been chargeable with known iniquity? Were the former to judge favourably of their religious state, from the few religious deeds which they have done, they would obviously be deceived. And were the latter to pronounce sentence against themselves, on account of the few more aggravated sins into which they have fallen, their judgment would be equally wrong. In both cases they ought to take into their account, not simply all the actions of a single day or week, or a few of the most remarkable actions of several years,

* Cor. x. 12.

but the general scope and tenor of their life, for a considerable period. It is this, and this alone, which stamps a character on the conversation and deportment; and it is from this broad ground, and not from a single point or two, that any one can judge of his whole character.

Again, to judge your state impartially, you must try yourself by those marks which are *counterfeit*, as well as by these which are *genuine*.—The imposing and deceptive resemblance of the former to the latter, and our proneness to cling to the favourable side of the inquiry, and to lay hold of every thing which seems to encourage our wishes and hopes, render this highly proper. And, were you to examine yourself only by the tests of true godliness, even admitting that you had a right before God to conclude that you are one of his children; unless you have looked at the false marks also, you may afterwards be distressed with apprehensions that you have nothing else as the ground of your hope.

In fine, to judge your state impartially, you ought to look at the *worst* parts of your character, as well as the *best*.—Should you examine yourself with respect to the one of these, and overlook the other, you would resemble a Jury who heard witnesses and counsel, either *for*, or *against*, a person charged with crime, without listening to the opposite side; and who, therefore, could not be expected to pass an impartial verdict. Justice requires that both sides be heard. By neglecting this, and looking only at the best parts of their character, strangers to genuine piety may flatter themselves into the belief that they are saints. And the people of God, contemplating only the worst parts of their character, unavoidably

would conclude themselves in a state of condemnation. To avoid such obvious partiality, you ought to place in one scale of the balance, all the just evidences you can collect in favour of your character; and in the other, all the just claims against it; and then to give sentence according as either preponderates.

By attending to these plain directions, in a great measure you will be guarded against partiality, and enabled to arrive at a right decision. And as so very much depends on this,—as without it, your labour will be lost, and you may be flattered to your everlasting hurt,—give all possible diligence to see your character as it really is in the judgment of God's word.

5. Self-examination should be performed repeatedly.—In settling a point of difficult inquiry, lest we should be mistaken, we again and again review the steps by which we have come to our decision. Especially we do so, if the matter be of great magnitude and importance. Should it be a business which involved our worldly property, and in which a mistake might strip us of all we possess, and reduce us to abject poverty; we would not satisfy ourselves with looking over it simply once. How great soever our care, and diligence, and patient deliberation, during our first search might be, we would examine it repeatedly, that no room might be left for suspicion, that perhaps we were deceived.

And is it not reasonable and highly proper that we should act in a similar way, in determining the all-important question, whether we are the friends, or the enemies of Christ? Is not accuracy in this inquiry of incomparably greater magnitude, than in

matters relating to this transitory life? A mistake respecting the latter can reach no farther than the grave; but, in regard to the former, it may extend through eternity. Should we flatter ourselves that we are interested in Christ, while yet we are strangers to his grace, and remain under the delusion till death hurry us into the presence of our Judge, our doom must be terrible.—Let me entreat you, therefore, to attend to this plain direction. Far from deeming one attempt at self-examination all that is requisite to satisfy your mind, and to settle your estimate of your state, at proper intervals repeat the trial again and again. Every succeeding time, let it be performed, not only with equal, but, if possible, with increasing care. Sometimes you may trace precisely the same ground as you did formerly, that you may see whether you again arrive at the same conclusion. And at other times it will be proper that you fix on fresh topics of trial, which may be better adapted to your case and circumstances, and calculated to lead you more easily and satisfactorily to discern your true character.

6. You must, on every point of trial, make the word of God the standard by which you judge.—This is a rule of pre-eminent importance, and which ought universally and constantly to be observed. The neglect of it has frequently been attended with painful and pernicious consequences.—It is a fact which cannot be denied, that in some well-meant treatises, composed by good men, the standard of Christian character is raised so high, that few indeed, if any, have ever reached its measure. These authors have described what a Christian should be, in a state of perfection, rather than what he really is, or can be in

his present imperfect state. And, on the other hand, some have reduced the standard so low, that scarcely any who have a religious profession, and a fair external appearance, supported by a regular attention to forms of duty, come short of its test. Trusting, however, to the marks delineated by the former, as if they were infallibly accurate, some genuine saints have given themselves much unnecessary disquietude; and have rashly condemned themselves, because they came short of the exaggerated criterion. While others who are mere formalists, by having recourse to the diminished standard of the latter, have felt satisfied with their spiritual condition, till it was too late to have it altered. So dangerous a thing it is to trust to a human standard, in measuring the work of the Spirit of God.

I mean not to condemn all human compositions, which are designed to assist in the difficult work of self-examination. To do this would be to pronounce sentence against myself, for attempting to add to the number of such works. Some of them are well calculated for this purpose. But no one of them is, or can be, perfect. The only infallible standard is the word of God; and it is only in so far as the marks laid down in other books, are plainly founded upon, and agreeable to, this divine test, that they are entitled to confidence. “To the law, and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”*

In trying your character by the word of God, it would obviously be absurd to expect, that by opening the Bible at random, the first passage which appears, or any other to which you may happen acci-

dentially to turn, will be sufficient for this purpose. So far from this, you must employ much diligence, and prudent and skilful discernment, in their selection; unless, by the labours of others, you have them prepared to your hand. Passages of this kind, which exhibit marks of the character of the righteous, or of the wicked, you must frequently meet with, if you are daily conversant with the sacred volume. Such passages, therefore, you ought attentively to mark, that you may be able, without loss of time, readily to refer to them, as occasion requires.

Let me caution you to beware of picking up isolated or detached texts, without any regard to the connexion in which they stand, or any respect to the general import of scripture on the same subject. The neglect of attention to these points, in some instances relating to character, as well as doctrine, must unavoidably lead to the misunderstanding and perversion of the word of God. Seek the meaning of every text on which you fix, from the scope of the passage from which it is selected; or, if its precise sense cannot thus be determined, have recourse to similar expressions of scripture, in other parts, where it may be found. Thus your faith will rest on the testimony of God, and not on the opinions and comments of men.

7. Throughout the whole process of self-examination, study to exercise a constant dependence on the aid of the Spirit of God, and to act as in his presence.—In a former section you were reminded, that you ought to commence this duty with a deep sense of your inability to perform it aright, without the aid of the Spirit of God, and with fervent prayer for his assistance. Superadded to this, I now wish

it impressed on your minds, that in every step as you advance in this exercise, you ought to look up for an answer of peace to your supplications. You are to *expect*, as well as to ask; and, in a waiting posture, to depend on him for that help which he has encouraged you to solicit. Thus acted the holy Psalmist—“Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us.” “I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning; I say, more than they that watch for the morning.”*

The neglect of this duty prevents many prayers from receiving an answer of peace. After divine assistance has been implored, too often do men forget to look expectingly after it, and therefore obtain it not. Let it be your study, therefore, to guard against this practical error. As you would sincerely desire to enjoy the unerring guidance of the Holy Spirit, while you sit in judgment on your spiritual state, endeavour to exercise a humble, believing, and steady reliance on him for its attainment. Before you decide on any part of your investigation, raise your heart to him, and fervently say, “Lord, in obedience to thy commandment, I have sought thy assistance, and on it I am now depending. Withhold it not from me, for the sake of the blood and advocacy of thy Son. Let the light of thy Holy Spirit now beam on my heart, and direct my understand-

* Psal. cxxlii. 1, 2; cxxx. 5, 6.

ing and judgment. And suffer me not to form a wrong estimate, in this trial, of my real character and prospects for eternity!"

In fine, study, during the whole time you are engaged in this exercise, to remember that you are under the omniscient eye of God. Though your person and employment be concealed from the knowledge of men, yet the omnipresent Jehovah has accompanied you into your retirement, and marks your conduct, and every movement of your mind.—Were you to behold some visible token of his presence, such as shone in the most holy place of the sanctuary, how would your mind be solemnized! And were you to hear his voice addressing you, "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins," how would it excite you to perform this work with the utmost possible care! But as certainly as if you both saw and heard him, he is with you. He watches your diligence and solicitude, and the judgment which you pass concerning your state. O let this solemn consideration rest on your mind, and make you active and faithful in this work!

Having thus given you these few directions to assist you in this difficult and important work, let me entreat you to endeavour to reduce them to practice. Though you should frequently have attempted this duty, on former occasions, without arriving at any convincing and satisfactory conclusion, be not discouraged from engaging in it again, and that too with increasing care and diligence. On no account desist from this trial, till you see on what ground you stand. If you be indeed a child of God, by persevering activity in improving the various means of grace, and repeated exertions in self-examination, it

is scarcely possible that you can remain in utter uncertainty of your character.

Should you be an entire stranger to this duty, notwithstanding your religious profession, you have too much cause to fear that you are destitute of vital piety. Wherever this divine principle exists, it produces a holy jealousy about the state of the soul, and excites to a deep and restless concern about an interest in Christ's salvation. The consequence of this must be, therefore, some endeavour to know what is the real character.—Let me beseech you, without farther delay, to begin this trial. Do not for another day continue uncertain, whether you have nothing more than the name and semblance of godliness, or are indeed a son or daughter of the Lord Almighty. The speedy determination of this question is of infinitely higher importance to you, than any other business which can demand your attention. To assist you in this, is the aim of the two following chapters.

CHAPTER IV.

FALSE MARKS FREQUENTLY MISTAKEN AS EVIDENCES OF A GRACIOUS STATE.

1. Sharp and painful convictions.—2. Some kind of sorrow for sin.—3. A temporary, or a partial forsaking of sin.—4. The non-appearance of vicious affections, mistaken for their non-existence.—5. A strict observance of religious duties.—6. Religious gifts, viewed as effects of the Holy Spirit's saving operations.—7. Natural mildness of temper, taken for Christian meekness.—8. A naturally merciful and beneficent disposition.—9. Some kind of delight in the ordinances of the gospel.—10. Some kind of love to the people of God.—11. Some kind of love to Christ.—12. A spurious zeal in the cause of religion.—13. A formal and written self-dedication to the Lord.—14. Confident and boasting assurance of salvation.

THERE is nothing respecting which mankind are more prone to deceive themselves, than the state of their souls, and their prospects for eternity. If they seriously think about these things at all, as it is natural for them to wish the best of themselves, so they are frequently credulous of what they wish. On very slender and fallacious evidence, they often hastily conclude that all is well with them, while yet they stand on the brink of everlasting ruin. Scrupulously as they examine, and re-examine, the validity of that tenure by which they hold their worldly property,—and difficult as it is to persuade them that their right to it is secure; they usually manifest a very different turn of mind, in matters which pertain to their salvation. Here they are soon and

easily satisfied. Here they are readily and willingly deceived. The slightest apparent foundation of hope, delusive and false though it be, is eagerly grasped at, and too often relied on with confidence.

To prevent any, who may peruse these pages, from deceiving themselves in a matter of such magnitude, I shall endeavour to expose those false marks, which are frequently laid hold of, as sure indications of a gracious state. I cannot pretend to enumerate them all. What I purpose is, shortly to consider the most common and dangerous.

The first which I shall mention is, sharp and painful convictions.—There are few, if indeed any, except those who have been inured to open impiety from their childhood, or brought up in the most stupid ignorance of divine things, who have not, on some occasions, felt their heart alarmed with a sense of their guilt and danger. Particularly this is the case with those who are in early life, and whose consciences have not yet become obdurate by wilful persistency in sin. In youth the mind is most easily susceptible of religious impressions,—most easily affected with shame and sorrow for what is evil, and excited to form purposes of following what is good. At this early period, therefore, convictions of sin are most common, most distressful in their operation, and most permanent in their effects. When young persons attentively peruse these parts of the Bible, or of other religious books which describe the evil nature and ruinous consequences of sin; when they hear them plainly and faithfully set before them in the preaching of the gospel; when they are called to witness the death of relations or acquaintances; or when they are visited with bodily afflictions, or

brought apparently to the brink of the grave; it often happens that they are filled with deep alarm. Their sins marshalled, in dreadful array, rise up before them, and loudly tell them, that "for all these things God will bring them into judgment." In some cases their convictions are so painful and terrifying, that they are overwhelmed with dismay, and driven to the very brink of despair. Day after day they fill them with apprehensions of the wrath which is to come,—deprive them of rest at night,—unfit them for the ordinary business of life,—and make them forget to eat their daily bread. In the emphatic language of Job, "the arrows of the Almighty are within them, the poison whereof drinketh up their spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against them."*

Many who have experienced the distress arising from an awakened conscience, have regarded it as a sure evidence of a gracious change in their souls. Hearing of the extreme anguish which some of God's children have endured at the time of their conversion, they imagine what they have felt, must have been of the same nature; and consequently conclude that they are partakers of the new birth. Especially they are confirmed in this belief, when their painful convictions are followed, by some degree of reformation in their general practice.

Here I wish it to be clearly understood, that no convictions of sin, how painful soever, and protracted, and frequently repeated they may have been, are in themselves sure indications that the Spirit of God has operated a saving change on the heart. The saying is not less true because it is common, "Con-

* Job vi. 4.

viction is not conversion." Though usually the former does precede the latter; yet alarming convictions often pass away, without being attended by a gracious and effectual change. Many, like Felix, tremble under a sense of their guilt and danger; but, like him too, hold fast their darling iniquities. And others, like Herod, "do many things," in the way of temporary and partial reformation, while yet they remain unrenewed in heart.—Trust not, therefore to your convictions, as evidences of a gracious state. Whatever may have been their degree, or continuance, unless they have led you to a permanent hatred of all known sin, and an unreserved relinquishment of it, they are to be regarded as harbingers of God's wrath, rather than the tokens of his favour. It is to the *effects* of convictions, and not to convictions themselves, that you ought to look in judging your religious character. Unless you have been turned by them from the love and practice of sin, to the love and practice of holiness, you are a stranger to the saving operations of the Spirit of God.

2. The next false mark which I shall specify is, some kind of sorrow for sin.—Some degree of sorrow is a necessary consequence of conviction. Men who are distressed with an alarming view of the greatness of their sins, and who are either experiencing or dreading their direful effects, cannot but be grieved on account of them. Their grief, however, may be totally destitute of every gracious principle. While there is a "godly sorrow which worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of;" there is also the "sorrow of the world which worketh death."* This sorrow originates wholly

* 2 Cor. vii. 10.

from the punitive consequences of sin, and not from sin itself. Its bitter fruits experienced, or dreaded, excite it; and not in the slightest degree any view of its native baseness, and of the dishonour and offence which it has done to God.

Thus, for example, the sensualist, when smarting under the effects of his debauchery, and feeling his constitution so debilitated, that he can no longer pursue the course which he loves, must be grieved on account of his licentious practices. The spendthrift who has wasted his fortune, and reduced himself and his family to squalid poverty, if not devoid of humanity, must experience compunction for his extravagances. The cheat, when detected in his fraudulent transactions,—the hypocritical professor when his true character has been unveiled,—and the liar when his falsehood has been exposed; cannot fail to be sorry for the forfeiture of their reputation. The passionate man, when he finds that the ebullitions of his ungoverned temper, have alienated from him his best friend, involved him in broils, or hurried him into the commission of some disgraceful deed; must feel keen self-reproach, and heart relentings, for his voluntary madness. And, in fine, any sinner, when subjected to the painful results of his iniquities, or filled with anticipations of the awful retribution which awaits him beyond the grave, may be affected with violent agitations of sorrow. Deeply distressed, he may cast himself on his knees, and with sobbing bosom, and streaming eyes, confess his guilt to the Lord, and supplicate his forgiveness.

In all these cases, however, the sorrow experienced is not on account of sin itself, but its consequences,—not because of guilt, but of punishment. Could the

sensualist repair his constitution; the spendthrift retrieve his fortune; the cheat, the hypocrite, and the liar, re-establish their good name; the passionate man undo the effects of his temporary frenzy; and the convinced, but sin-loving trembler assure himself there is no hell,—their sorrow would cease. They would think no more of their sins; but, if not deterred by the dread of similar effects, with increased avidity would return to indulgence in them, “like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.”*

Notwithstanding, some persons who have felt a sorrow of this nature, have flattered themselves into the belief that it is of a godly sort, and is a sure evidence of their sincere repentance. When they read, “They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy:”—“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted;”† they hastily conclude that their tears and mourning, warrant them to lay hold of these promises. But in this they sadly deceive themselves.

No sorrow for sin is characteristic of a gracious state, unless it arises chiefly from a sense of its baseness and ingratitude against God,—a God so good and gracious; the dishonour which it does to his perfections, laws, and government; and the insult which it offers to Christ, who shed his blood as an atonement for it. Though views of the future punishment of sin, and the experience of its present bitter effects, must contribute in part to produce godly sorrow; yet principally it springs from discoveries of its intrinsic odiousness, as committed against the God of our life and salvation. Every gracious mourner cordially joins with David in his peniten-

* 2 Pet. ii. 22.

† Psal. cxxvi. 5; Matt. v. 5.

tial confessions to the Lord,—“Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight;”* and exclaims with the returning prodigal, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.”† Whereas, he whose sorrow is not produced by the Spirit of God, looks only at the mischief which he has done to himself and his fellow men. But not one sigh does he heave, and not one tear does he shed, because of his ingratitude and dishonour to the Lord.

3. Another mark mistaken by some as an evidence of a gracious state is, a temporary, or a partial forsaking of sin.—It is no unusual thing for persons who are greatly distressed with convictions of their guilt, and terrifying apprehensions of their danger, to abandon for a time their iniquitous pursuits. While they cannot follow them with comfort and apparent safety, they judge it expedient to give up with indulging in them,—till they can find a more convenient season. Or they may go so far as to form the purpose to relinquish some of them for ever, and may actually carry it into execution. They may permanently forsake those sins which have been the cause of their disquietude and misery, while yet, without any remorse, they retain others, from which, as they imagine, they are sustaining no present injury. The painful effects of their beloved sins on their health, their reputation, their fortune, or their peace of mind, may compel them to desist from a course, which, but for these circumstances, they would still follow. Or the change of place, or company, or employment, may render indulgence in them impracticable. Or, perhaps, they leave their

* Psal. li. 4.

† Luke xv. 18.

favourite vices, because they are no longer able to pursue them; or rather, their vices leave them, when they are incapable of giving them entertainment.

From these causes, and others of a similar nature, an obvious reformation is frequently produced. The drunkard abandons the intoxicating cup; the son of pleasure, falsely so called, forsakes the haunts of lewdness and dissipation; the prodigal becomes thrifty and economical; the profane swearer ceases to mouth the heavens, and dares not to sport with the sacred names of Jehovah; the sabbath-breaker externally respects the hallowed day of the Lord; and the man of strife is distinguished for a peaceful demeanour. So remarkable may the change be, that all who know them must notice it, and may be induced to account them, in the best acceptance of the terms, “new men.” And even they themselves may conclude, especially should they in these circumstances assume a Christian profession, and feel their minds in any degree impressed with religious thoughts, that they have been made partakers of that grace which changes the heart, and enables men to change their conduct. Comparing their present with their past deportment, and marking the great difference, they but too readily imagine that it must be owing to the renovating operations of the Spirit of God.

In these mistaken sentiments they fortify themselves, by such portions of holy writ as the following,—“He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him;

and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."* Thus without duly considering that their forsaking of sin is only *partial*, and not of every known iniquity, only *constrained* and *reluctant*, and not voluntary; only *outward*, and not in heart; and that, notwithstanding all their reformation and profession, the love of sin remains unsubdued; they deceive themselves, and hang their hopes of heaven on a frail and broken reed.

4 Some mistake the non-appearance of vicious affections, for their non-existence.—Nothing can be more certain than the fact, that the love of sin may exist in the heart, in a state of concealment, while peculiar circumstances may prevent its operation in the life. Persons of this stamp may never have been placed in a situation, and under the influence of circumstances. favourable to the development of their latent corruptions; and in a great measure may be ignorant of their own wicked propensities, till they be tried. Free, in the mean while, from open and gross transgressions, they may deem themselves incapable of their commission; and may imagine that no temptation could seduce them into sins, which they loudly condemn in others.—Such was the case with Hazael. When the prophet Elisha fixedly stared him in the face, wept at the foresight of his murderous and brutal deeds, and foretold him what he would do to the children of Israel,—filled with indignation he replied, "But what! is thy servant a dog that he should do this great thing? And Elisha answered, The Lord hath showed me that thou shalt be king of Syria."† The change which was to take place in his rank and condition, as the prophet in-

* Prov. xxviii. 13.; Isa. lv. 7.

† 2 Kings viii. 11.

sinuated, would be sufficient to unfold his true character, and to produce this fearful change in his conduct.

Like him, many whose depraved affections have not obtained vent, flatter themselves that they are free from their existence. They are not swearers, drunkards, whoremongers, thieves, &c.; and therefore they conclude that their hearts are better than those of persons chargeable with these sins. Their character is fair, and their outward conduct hitherto unblemished; and therefore they think they must possess good principles.—Many stumble on this ground; and difficult, it must be confessed, in some instances it really is, to ascertain whether the present non-appearance of wicked affections, arises from the dominion of grace in the heart, or from restraints which are merely natural. In general, however, this point may be easily determined. When there is a secret consciousness that any sin is habitually loved, whatever that sin may be; and when the thoughts of it afford delight, and are frequently dwelt on: outward abstinence from that iniquity most certainly does not, and cannot, flow from gracious principle. Any sin cherished in the heart, needs only favourable circumstances to mature it into open practice.

5. Another false ground of confidence is, a strict observance of religious duties.—External obedience to the commands of God, is undeniably within the power of those who are destitute of every gracious principle. While they totally overlook the motives from which it proceeds, and the dispositions of mind with which it should be performed, their obedience, in the judgment of men, may be not only irreprehensible, but highly exemplary.—Such appears to have

been the general character of the Pharisees. Though Christ often styles them hypocrites; yet those who could see no farther than the outside of their practice, accounted them men of eminent sanctity. They prayed much in public, fasted often, scrupulously paid tithes of all they possessed, abounded in almsgiving, and regularly attended the public institutions of religion. And, not only were they reputed great saints by others, but they “trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” Yet our Redeemer thus expressed himself concerning them; “I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”*—Such too was the character of the young ruler who came to Jesus, and asked him, “Good master, what good thing shall I do, that I may inherit eternal life?” Our Lord referred him to that obedience exacted by the commandments of the moral law. “All these,” replied the amiable youth, “all these have I kept from my youth up.”† And yet, as the result of his interview with Christ proves, he loved the world more than God, and parted with the Saviour rather than part with his idol.—And such, we have cause to believe, was Judas the traitor. Accordingly when Christ told his disciples that one of them should betray him, far from suspecting that base deceiver, so unblamable had his outward observance of religious duties been, each of them began to suspect himself,—“Lord, is it I?”‡

Similar to these examples, are many in our churches at this day. They have the name and the form of godliness, but are destitute of its spirit and power.

* Matth. v. 20.

† Matth. xix. 20.

‡ Matth. xxvi. 22.

Not only do they abstain from open impiety, and every thing which might render their character suspicious; but they do much that is positively good,—perhaps all externally that could be expected by man. They are sober, honest, and industrious; liberal in their alms to the poor; ready to contribute to benevolent and religious institutions; regular in attending the public ministrations of the gospel; go to the Lord's table; and, which is not so common, perhaps maintain the worship of God in their families. But notwithstanding all their religious observances, and strict attention to the exterior of godliness, their hearts remain unchanged; the world predominates in their affections; and, in God's estimation, they are mere formalists. Though they may not be intentional hypocrites,—persons who perform religious services, to obtain the commendation of men; yet they look not beyond the outward round of duty, and feel not the slightest concern for God's glory. In all they do, they have no respect to His command and authority, or their own spiritual improvement; but are actuated solely by the influence of early education, of habit, and of natural conscience.

Characters of this stamp make a Saviour of their duties. Whatever they may profess to the contrary, they rest on them instead of Christ; and in proportion to their number, and the punctuality with which they have been observed, is their peace and confidence. And, in addition to all this, the good opinion which others express respecting their piety, tends powerfully to confirm them in their fatal delusion. To such persons, God's charge against his ancient Israel is applicable;—"This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do

honour me; but have removed their hearts far from me, and their fear towards me is taught by the precept of men.”*

6. Some mistake religious gifts, as effects of the Holy Spirit's saving operations.—The natural powers of mind which God communicates to mankind, are greatly diversified. To use the figurative language of scripture, to some he gives only one talent, while to others he commits five, and to others ten. Besides, the opportunities which men enjoy for improving their natural capacities, are also exceedingly various. So remarkably is this the case, that one whose faculties are originally inferior to others, from being favoured with superior advantages for their culture, may at length far excel them in their attainments. When, therefore, both of these meet in the same individual,—great natural gifts, and favourable opportunities for their improvement,—a decided superiority must be obtained over others, who have been blessed with neither of them, or with one of them only.

When persons thus highly privileged have received a religious education, and been accustomed from their early youth to hear, and to join in, religious conversation and devotional exercises; though they be strangers to all saving grace, they will soon apparently surpass, in these duties, many who are really the children of God. Their theoretical knowledge of religious subjects, and their powers of ready utterance, may enable them to discourse on these topics, with fluency and precision, and to the edification of others. And should they be called to officiate in social prayer, the suitableness and copiousness of

* Isa. xxix. 13.

their language, the apparent seriousness and warmth of their expressions, and the lively and tender affection with which they go through that service, may impose both on others, and on themselves.—When such persons have a Christian profession, and are free from outward blemishes in their general deportment, the Lord's people are ready to court their acquaintance, and to speak of them, and to them, as if they were saints of the first magnitude. They take them along with them to exhort, and comfort, and pray with, the afflicted; and admit them willingly into their private fellowship meetings, and confidential religious conferences.

Under this flattering treatment, and the consciousness of their superior powers, at length they begin to think that they have some claim to the religious character which they have obtained. Instead of attending to the operations of their own mind, in which pride, and self-righteous complacency, make them seek to be approved of men, rather than of God, and consequently prove their want of genuine godliness; they greedily drink the praise of those who class them among the fearers of the Lord, and conclude that their attainments are proofs that they are favoured with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The ardour of their natural affections, they imagine springs from his sacred influences; and, their splendid religious gifts, they mistake for his gracious and saving endowments.

Persons of this description ought to consider, that many have been distinguished for religious gifts, who were destitute of vital piety. Balaam, though courted and revered by others as a prophet of the Lord, and though seemingly actuated by concern for his

authority and honour; yet loved the wages of unrighteousness, and perished in his sins. Judas, along with the rest of the twelve, preached repentance, and called men to believe in the Messiah; and yet it would have been better for him if he had never been born. Let such persons, therefore, tremble lest their doom should be equally terrible. Let them seriously ponder these words of an apostle,—“ Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, (love to God and to men) I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”* Nor let them forget the declaration of Christ,—“ Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye workers of iniquity.”†

7. Some mistake natural mildness of temper, for Christian meekness.—That mankind differ widely from each other in their natural tempers and dispositions, will not be denied. Some are destitute of every resemblance of that amiable meekness, which, in some degree, is characteristic of all who have learned of Christ. Their ardent and irascible spirits are ever ready, by the slightest excitement, to hurry them into sudden ebullitions of passion, and to make them feared and hated by all with whom they have intercourse.—But there are others, who, from a naturally happy temperament of mind, or the advantages of wise and prudent training from their earliest youth, or the combined operation of both, possess a very near resemblance of Christian meekness. Such

* 1 Cor. xiii, 1.

† Matth. vii. 22, 23.

is the control which they have over their passions, that they can scarcely be visibly irritated, and driven into unguarded and wrathful language and practice. So remarkably is this the case with some, who have neither the profession, nor the knowledge of godliness, that their meekness is a reproach to many who bear the Christian name. And, what is more, they may appear to possess this temper in a higher degree than some who are truly the children of God; and whose naturally harsh and fiery dispositions, though subdued by grace, still manifest somewhat of their native tendency.

This constitutional, or educational, or prudential meekness, is mistaken by some as a Christian temper. Persons possessed of it, and who not only have a religious profession, but a conduct outwardly decent and irreproachable, are apt to view it as an indication of a sanctified mind. When they compare their temper, with that of some good men around them, they cannot but perceive how superior in meekness they are to these Christians; and consequently infer from it, the certainty that they themselves are in a gracious state. And in this persuasion they confirm themselves, by such texts of scripture as the following;—"The Lord will beautify the meek with salvation;"—"The meek will he guide in judgment; and the meek will he teach his way;"—"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."*

Christian meekness differs, in several respects, from that which is simply the result of nature or habit. The latter flows not from a desire to obey and honour God, to imitate the example of Christ, and to promote the interests of godliness. But the

* Ps. xxv. 9.; cxlix. 4.; Matth. v. 5.

former is always influenced and actuated by these motives. That which springs from nature only, is accompanied with the love of sin, and indifference about purity of heart and practice; whereas that which proceeds from grace, is attended with hatred to all iniquity.

8. Another ground of deception, akin to the former, is a naturally merciful and beneficent disposition.—That all who are partakers of saving grace, are in some degree characterised for this temper of mind, is readily admitted. But there is a compassion, which prompts men to kind offices, who are destitute of grace. To this they are inclined, not by Christian principle, but by nature and education. Their tender feelings will not allow them to look on an object of distress, without some workings of sympathy; and, when they have it in their power, they would offer violence to themselves, were they to refrain from doing something to alleviate his sufferings. Their condoling tear, and soothing accents of pity, are ever ready; and their helping hand is not withheld. With their substance they minister to the wants of the poor and needy, and often cause the heart of the widow and orphan to sing for joy.

Who that looks on such characters, clothed with a Christian profession, and exemplifying virtues which appear decisively Christian, would not be ready to exclaim,—“These men are not far from the kingdom of God.” “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”* Who would not be disposed to apply to them, the sentence which Christ has assured us he will pronounce in favour of his people, in the great day of judgment;—“Come, ye blessed

* Matth. v. 7.

of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.—Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”* Nor are such persons the last to apply these encouraging passages to themselves. On the contrary, they grasp at them as their ground of hope, and infer from them the certainty of their salvation.

Yet all this may be done from motives and principles which are merely natural. The Pharisees were liberal in their alms to the needy, and yet had heavy woes denounced against them by the Saviour. And an apostle affirms, “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”† That mercy and beneficence which are evidential of true godliness, and which Christ has promised to reward, flow from love to him, and a regard to his authority and honour. The kind deeds to which they prompt, are always chiefly, though not exclusively, performed to those who are of the household of faith. And, far from being restricted to the body, they are principally designed to remove the misery, and to secure the happiness, of the immortal soul. While this better part is neglected, no compassion which can be shown to the outward man, can be a proof of gracious principle.

9. Many conclude that they are in a gracious state, because they feel much delight in hearing the gospel.

* Matth. xxv. 34—49.

† 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

—This is commonly regarded an evidence of a renewed heart. And, properly understood, it is so. But though every genuine saint does take delight in approaching to God in his sanctuary, in joining in the prayers and praises of his worship, and in listening to the glad tidings of eternal life; yet every kind of pleasurable feeling in these services, is far from being a proof of true piety. On the contrary, the Bible authorizes us to maintain, that many experience some kind of delight in them, who are still in league with sin.

God thus characterises his professing people Israel,—“ They speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the Lord. And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not.”* — Concerning the incestuous Herod also it is recorded, that “ he feared John, knowing that he was a just man, and a holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.”† And of the same stamp were some of those mentioned by our Lord, in the parable of the sower;—“ He that received the seed into stony ground, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while; for when tribulation

* Ezek. xxxiii. 30—32.

† Mark vi. 20.

or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.”*

Persons of this character may experience delight in waiting on the public ordinances of the gospel, not because they are the appointed mediums of enjoying communion with God and his people, and the means of promoting their holiness and meetness for the society, the employments, and the bliss of heaven; but simply on account of the eloquence of the preacher. The lofty imagery which he employs; the lively and animating portraitures which he draws; and the glowing diction, and happily modulated tones and cadence, in which they are expressed, fill them with admiration and joy. To their favourite preacher they listen with pleasure; but the very same truths, or truths far more important, and more plainly and faithfully pressed home on their conscience, they can hardly endure to hear from the lips of some other servants of Christ. The joy of such persons arises from the fascinating manner of the orator; and not from the soul-humbling, Christ-exalting, and heart-purifying character of the message which he brings in the name of the Lord.

Or it may be, that the delight which they experience, consists in the temporary excitement of agreeable feelings, while yet it reaches not their hearts, and has no commanding influence over their lives. The lively representations which they hear of the glories and felicity of heaven; of the matchless love of Christ in giving himself a ransom for our redemption; and of the freedom and fulness with which he offers himself, and all new covenant blessings, to the chief of sinners,—produce sudden emotions of plea-

* Matth. xiii. 20.

sure, and thrill them with a kind of solemn delight. All this, however, is purely the working of natural affection. It has nothing gracious in it, any more than the pleasure which they experience, in hearing a well-told and interesting fiction. Yet some are deceived by it, and regard it a sure indication of the Spirit's work on their souls,—a pleasure which is a foretaste of heaven, and an evidence of a sanctified relish for hallowed enjoyments.

10. Multitudes deceive themselves in consequence of experiencing some kind of love to the people of God.—That there is a love to the people of God which is a proof of genuine piety, is incontrovertible. The testimony of an apostle is,—“ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.”* And a greater than apostles has said,—“ By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”† It has somehow become a current opinion, that this is one of the lowest marks of genuine grace,—a mark which many can lay claim to, who are unable to perceive in themselves any other evidence of it whatever. And truly this would be the case, were this love nothing different from what they conceive. This, however, is a dangerous, though a common error. It arises from the supposition, that this love to the brethren of Christ, is essentially different from love to Christ himself; and that the former may exist, where no trace of the latter can be seen. But this is impossible. The truth is, that this love to the children of God, is nothing else than the love of Christ's image in them; which so plainly involves the love of him whose resemblance they bear, that

* 1 John iii. 4.

† John xiii. 35.

the two are inseparable. Where the one is visible, the other cannot be hid. Where love to Christ is wanting, this love to his genuine disciples can have no existence. Every one must first love him who begat, before he can love those who are begotten of him; and love them, because they are his children, bear his image, and are active in promoting his glory.

Ignorant, or forgetful, of this, too many look only at the fact, that they do love some good men, without inquiring on what account they love them. The fact is not, and cannot be denied, that men destitute of every principle of godliness, may love particular followers of Christ, from causes which are purely natural and worldly. They may love them because they belong to their family, kindred, or party, —because they are peaceable and obliging neighbours,—because they have experienced their tender sympathy under trials,—or because they have participated of their benefactions. In a word, they may love some saints, on the very same accounts that they love some who are the men of the world. But all this is obviously nothing above what any man may do. All this has nothing in it indicative of a renewed heart. And yet too many, who can ascend no higher in their claims to the Christian character, take their stand on this low and sandy foundation.

11. Another false mark which misleads many, is some kind of love to Christ.—Harsh and startling as it may sound in the ears of a Christian, to affirm that those who are in “the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity,” may have any kind of love to Christ; it is not on this account the less certain. That there is a love to the Redeemer, which is a plain and decisive test of vital union with him, is

readily granted. But of this gracious affection there is a specious counterfeit, which is but too frequently mistaken for that which is genuine.

Depraved though our natures be, we are so constituted that we cannot withhold some degree of our approbation and esteem, from one who is a public benefactor, and who has performed deeds, either for ourselves or others, which are great, generous, and disinterested. The man who has devoted his time and wealth to relieve the needy and oppressed; or who has hazarded his life to snatch a stranger from the overwhelming flood, or the devouring flame, we cannot but applaud and love. The name of a Howard awakens our esteem. Nor does it require any peculiar share of humanity to do so. No one in civilized society can feel otherwise, unless, by habits of cruelty, he has divested himself of what is common to our nature, and become absolutely brutalized.

On this obvious principle it is easy to see, that men who are devoid of every holy disposition may possess some kind of love to Christ. That he is the greatest, the most generous, and the most disinterested benefactor of guilty mankind, they cannot deny. And when it is plainly set before them, they not only readily admit it, but seem to feel it. When they read, or hear, affecting delineations of his character and work;—his glorious and supreme dignity,—his immeasurably great condescension and love,—his unwearied efforts to benefit men by his instructions, example, and miracles,—the meekness with which he submitted to unprovoked and relentless persecution,—and the ignominious and painful death which he voluntarily endured, that he might redeem perishing sinners from the awful consequen-

ces of their guilt, and raise them to the enjoyment of glory, honour, and immortality; they are constrained to admire and esteem his matchless benignity. Such warm and tender emotions of respect they may feel for him, that for a time he may appear to them the chief object of their love.—But promising as this seems, it is just what may be felt by an unrenewed heart. Their love to Christ is precisely of the same nature with that which they experience to any earthly benefactor, or even to the fictitious hero of a romance. There is nothing in it of a gracious character, and consequently it is productive of no sanctifying effect. It prompts them not for Christ's sake to sacrifice every forbidden gratification, to obey all his commandments, to seek after conformity to his image, and daily to take up their cross and to follow him.—Nor is it less transitory, than it is ineffective. Its sudden flash is soon extinguished; and, though it may be repeated again and again under fresh excitement, yet it gleams only to set in darkness. And yet from such a love to Christ as this,—the natural, unfruitful, and short-lived emotion of the unrenewed heart,—too many are inclined to judge favourably of their spiritual state.

12. A spurious zeal in the cause of religion, is mistaken by some as an evidence of vital piety.—That “it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing,” is the declaration of an apostle.* And that it is always a most unpromising and suspicious symptom, to behold any professed Christian cold and indifferent in matters which relate to the glory of God, and his own salvation, is what no man can deny. But that there is “a zeal which is not according to

* Gal. iv. 18.

knowledge;”* and which, so far from being indicative of holy principle, is solely the effect of natural ardour, is equally incontrovertible. Not only may men destitute of godliness be very zealous in support of the grossest errors and absurdities; but they may display a similar temper in the cause of truth. Jehu, though he executed the threatened judgments of God against the house of Ahab, and the worshippers of Baal, and though he affirmed that in doing this, he was actuated by “zeal for the Lord of hosts;” yet was himself an idolater.† “Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.”‡ But great as was the zeal which he manifested for the worship of God, as soon as that priest died, he apostatized from the service of the Lord, and was guilty of shedding innocent blood. And thousands who have persecuted the followers of the Redeemer, have done so from professed zeal for his honour, and the purity of his worship;—nor can we doubt that some who have shed the blood of the saints, imagined that they were actually “doing God service.”§

False zeal is usually confined to small matters, while things of the highest importance are treated with indifference. The Pharisees were scrupulous in paying tithes of mint, anise, and cummin, but omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. They tenaciously held the traditions of the fathers, but hesitated not to transgress the law of God. Like them, many are vehemently attached to particular forms of worship, and to the shibboleth of their party, who testify little concern about practical godliness. “To be all on fire about rituals

* Rom. x. 2. † 2 Kings x. ‡ 2 Chron. xxiv. 2. § John xvi. 2.

*and ceremonials, either for them or against them, when we are negligent and indifferent about the very vitals of religion; to lay a mighty stress upon doubtful things, or the mere dictates of men, and yet to make a small account of the undoubted precepts of God, and even the plain dictates both of natural and revealed religion; to be exceeding eager upon such points as are confessed by all thinking men to be attended with great obscurity and difficulties; upon naughty and perplexing questions; but slightly to pass over the clear and obvious truths and duties of religion; this is an untoward and a monstrous zeal.**

No man ought to judge favourably of his spiritual state, simply on account of his zeal in religious matters, how ardent soever it may be, and to whatever length it may carry him in submitting to what he accounts persecution. An apostle says, "Though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."† Unless it be regulated by clear scriptural knowledge; be proportioned to the real importance of the matter in which it is exercised; be cherished against our own faults more readily than those of others; and be accompanied by other plain evidences of Christian character; we ought to guard against reliance on it as a mark of a gracious temper.

13. Some conclude that their state is safe, in consequence of having formally devoted themselves to the Lord, in a written dedication, or covenant.—The practice of personal self-dedication to the Lord in private, by writing a form of it, and subscribing it with the name, is much condemned by some teachers in our day. They represent it as "a practice

* Evans' Christian Temper, vol. II., Ser. XVIII. † 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

which is dangerous and ensnaring, calculated to lead to false peace and security, and to encourage men to rely on what is called *their covenant* with God, instead of *God's covenant* of peace exhibited to guilty men in the gospel." That such abuse is sometimes made of this deed, is not only readily granted, but is the very point which I here wish to expose.—At the same time I am far from reprehending this usage, as a thing which ought in every case to be avoided. On the contrary, I am persuaded that it is warranted by the word of God, and has been followed by many of his people, to their no small comfort and encouragement. Speaking by the prophet Isaiah, the Spirit of God foretells, that in seasons of great spiritual refreshment in his church, "One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel;"* words which, after all the various renderings and interpretations which have been given of them, appear to me to countenance this practice. The conduct of believers in the Macedonian churches, "who first gave their own selves to the Lord," and then resigned themselves to the direction of the apostles, is to the same purpose.† Besides, that every believer in Christ often dedicates himself to the Lord, in his meditations, resolutions, and prayers, will, I presume, be denied by none. But if they may, and ought, to do so in their thoughts, desires, and words of vocal utterance, what should render it improper in words which are written? If the former be right, the latter cannot be wrong, when performed with uprightness, and in

* Is. xliv. 5.

† 2 Cor. viii. 5.

the exercise of humble dependence on the grace of Christ.

But like many other things which are good in themselves, this practice is perverted by some into a ground of self-confidence. When men are under deep concern about their salvation, it is natural for them to flee to every thing which promises relief. They betake themselves to reading the scriptures, to prayer, to fasting, to acts of self-denial, and to abstinence from sinful gratifications; and, in some cases, to the work of self-dedication to God. They have seen it commended in religious books, or heard good men approve of it, when properly observed, as a method of strengthening their resolutions to serve him. To this deed, therefore, they have recourse, before their hearts have said *Amen* to God's covenant. They write and subscribe a dedication of themselves to the Lord, and begin to say to themselves, "The bargain is struck,—now Christ is ours, and we are his,—our salvation is certain."—Now, all this frequently has been done, by those whose subsequent conduct has too plainly proved their estrangement from God. The performance of this deed, therefore, viewed by itself, is no sure evidence of any man's christianity. And yet it is unquestionable that some rest their hopes almost solely on this precarious foundation. They have done so, and to this they cling as a ground of trust, though destitute of every genuine evidence that they are the children of God.

14. The last false mark which I shall mention is, a confident and boasting assurance of salvation.—Should most of the foregoing marks, or it may be the whole of them, be found in the same individual,

it is reasonable to suppose that they will excite in him a strong degree of confidence respecting the safety of his spiritual state. So fully persuaded of this may he be, that he may seldom be troubled with doubts respecting it, and may experience something which he accounts "joy and peace in believing." He may take pleasure in relating to others, the wonderful change which he has experienced, boldly claim Christ as his Saviour and portion, and speak of heaven as his final home, with an unhesitating assurance which may astonish many of the true followers of the Lamb. Such a man can seldom be long in any company till he wishes to let all around him know his high attainments in religion; impudently questions them whether they possess assurance of their interest in Christ, —a practice which even apostles did not exemplify among professing Christians,—pities and condemns those who dare not, and will not, be presumptuous and obtrusive like himself,—and, in effect, if not indeed in very words, says to every humble and self-condemning believer, "Stand by thyself, for I am more righteous than thou."

That some saints do attain assurance of their interest in Christ, cannot be denied, and shall afterwards be proved. *It is far, however, very far from being a common attainment. Generally they have their doubts and fears, and are filled with deep humility and self-abasement. So far from assurance, the most they can ordinarily reach, is humble trust. And of such persons there is more hope, than of those who are too confident. As a late eminent writer has well expressed himself,—“I entertain a better opinion of the modest, doubting, fearful professor, than of the bold and assured one. The life of

the former, as it seems to me, is, commonly at least, more watchful; more careful; more self-condemning; more scrupulous concerning the commission of sin, and the omission of duty; more declaratory of the spirit of little children. The spirit of the latter, even when he is admitted to be a Christian, appears to me to be often fraught, in an unhappy degree, with self-exaltation; with censoriousness, as well as contempt, of those who differ from him; with uncharitableness; with peremptoriness of opinion; and with an unwarrantable assurance of the rectitude of whatever he believes, says, or does. These certainly are not favourable specimens of any character. I would be far from ultimately condemning the profession of all those, in whom these things are more or less visible; yet I assert without hesitation, that their *light* would *shine* more clearly *before men*, were it not obscured by these clouds."*

They who have high and confident hopes of their interest in Christ, have much need to examine narrowly the grounds on which they rest. If they are nothing better than these which I have attempted to expose, and I trust satisfactorily proved to be fallacious, their towering hopes, like that of the hypocrite, shall be cut off, and shall utterly perish. Though they should feel as assured of their eternal happiness, as if they already had it in possession; yet, unless they be brought to entertain different views, and to build their expectations of celestial bliss on a different foundation, their disappointment shall be certain and awful. Never should it be forgotten, that it is not the *degree* of any man's confidence, but the *foundation* on which it is built, and the *evidence* by which

* Dwight's Theology, Sermon LXXXVIII.

it is supported, which attest the safety of his spiritual state.

Such then are some of the most dangerous false marks, by which too many are deceived. Let me beseech you, my reader, to examine yourself carefully by them; and if you find that you cannot lay claim to any thing higher and better, be assured you are still a stranger to the “washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost.”—Before you desist from this important inquiry, however, carry it still farther, and try your character by the genuine evidences of a gracious state, mentioned in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V.

GENUINE EVIDENCES OF SAVING GRACE.

1. Habitual renunciation of all dependence on our own righteousness, and an humble and fixed reliance on the righteousness of Christ.—2. Love to Christ in all his offices and characters.—3. A prevailing desire to be conformed to his image.—4. Love to the sword of God.—5. Love to the approved followers of Christ.—6. Love to the Lord's day, and to the public ordinances of religion.—7. Habitual endeavour to obey all God's commandments.—8. A cordial approval of the spirituality and holiness of the divine law.—9. The spirit and practice of secret prayer.—10. Rejecting the thoughts and emotions of sin.—11. Heavenly-mindedness.—12. Sincere concern for the salvation of others.

IN attempting this important part of his task, the writer would desire to be sensible of his awful responsibility. He is aware that should he elevate the standard higher than God himself has done in his word,—so high that few, if indeed any, of his children can reach its measure; it may grieve and wound the heart of some, whom the Lord commands his ministers to comfort. Or, should he venture to lower it beneath the divine standard; many presumptuous formalists may be flattered to their ruin. While, on the one hand, therefore, he does not wish to grieve any one of the generation of the godly,—to break the bruised reed, or to quench the smoking flax,—but rather to encourage the weakest in the

family of grace; on the other, he dare not speak peace to those, to whom God proclaims destruction. To guard against both extremes, he will endeavour to exhibit no mark of a gracious state, except those specified in the sacred volume. And that he may be kept from misrepresenting any of these, while he endeavours rigidly to adhere to what he conscientiously regards as the true meaning of scripture, he would look up to the Spirit of all truth, that he may be taught and guided by his illuminating influences. —In contemplating the numerous characteristics of God's children, mentioned in the Bible, he is constrained, for the sake of brevity, as well as of present utility, to make a selection of a few of the most prominent. The reader's attention is solicited to the following.

1. One of the leading evidences of saving grace is, habitual renunciation of all dependence on our own righteousness, and an humble and fixed reliance on the righteousness of Christ.—To bring us to this, is the grand design of that revelation of mercy which God has published in his word. In this divine record, the whole human race are described as sinners, —guilty, condemned, perishing, and helpless sinners. Here we are charged not only with innumerable violations of the divine law, in heart, in speech, and in practice; but we are assured that we can make no satisfaction to God, the lawgiver, by any thing which we can perform. Here we are told in the plainest terms, that “our own righteousness is as filthy rags,”—in other words, that our best works, our repentance, prayers, fastings, alms-deeds, and endeavours after holiness of life, are all stained with sin, and in the sight of God abominable. Of these,

therefore, God cannot, and will not accept, as an atonement for our transgressions, and the ground of our justification and admission into his friendship.

For this wretched and helpless condition, the gospel of Christ publishes a remedy. The good news and glad tidings which it announces, are pardon and life to every one who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. Its cheering message is, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life:"—"He who knew no sin, was made sin [a sin-offering] for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him:"—"There is no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus:"—and that to all such "he is made of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." And that none, on any account, may think themselves excluded, the Redeemer himself says, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out:" and his Spirit, speaking by his word; and the Bride his church, speaking by her ministers and members, "say, Come; and let him that heareth say, Come; and let him that is athirst come: and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." Here, then, we are assured that Christ by his substitutionary obedience to the death, as the ransom of our perishing race—his fulfilling all righteousness by the perfect obedience of his life, and his atoning for sin by his sufferings and blood,—has wrought out a righteousness for the justification of sinners; and that every one who believes on him shall obtain pardon, acceptance with God, and eternal glory. In fine, here we are assured that there is no refuge for us anywhere else, except in Christ; for "neither is

there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

Now, my reader, the important question which you are here to answer is, Have you believed this testimony of God respecting your sinfulness, the pollution of your very righteousness, and your exposure to eternal misery,—the spotless excellence of the righteousness of Christ, and your divine warrant to make it the ground of your trust for pardon and eternal life,—and, in consequence of this, have you renounced, and do you daily renounce all reliance on your own works, and put your entire dependence on the blood of Christ? Or, let the question be propounded in this other form; Have you seen, and do you still more and more see, your utter helplessness and hopelessness without Christ; have you fled to him as your only refuge from ruin; and can you cordially say with Paul, "What things were gain to me," (as I formerly regarded my own righteousness), "those I count loss for Christ: yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith?"* Much, very much, yea, *your all* depends on your true answer to this question. If still you be a stranger to a deep and humbling persuasion, that without Christ you must eternally perish; and be conscious that you are putting your trust for acceptance with

* Phil. iii. 7—9.

God, more in yourself, than in him; you have neither part nor lot in his great salvation. But if your heart can witness, as in the sight of God, that you are humbled, ashamed, and grieved when you contemplate, not only your manifold aggravated sins, but the imperfections and defilement of your best deeds; and, accounting it “a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners,” of whom you regard yourself one of the chief, that you do habitually endeavour to rely on his all-perfect sacrifice, and on it alone, as the ground of your hope,—you have good cause to conclude that you are a believer in Christ.

2. Love to Christ in all his offices and characters, is another evidence of a gracious state.—The want of love to Christ is invariably represented, in the sacred scriptures, as an evidence of an unrenewed heart; and that which exposes to exclusion from the favour of God. “If any man love not our Lord Jesus Christ, let him be (or he shall be) anathema, maranatha,”—accursed from Christ at his coming to judgment. But, on the other hand, all who sincerely love him, are here pronounced blessed. “Jesus said, If a man love me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him; and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.”*

In the preceding chapter it was shown, that unregenerated sinners may have some kind of love to Christ. They may entertain respect for him in some of his offices and characters; but it is impossible that they can love him in them all. They may esteem him as Jesus the Saviour; but they cannot love him as a strict and righteous Governor. They are pleas-

* 1 Cor. xvi. 22.; John xiv. 23.

ed with his benefits; but they dislike his yoke. They would be glad to be delivered by him from the wrath which is to come, and to be received at last into his celestial kingdom; but they are unwilling to submit to his laws, and daily to bear their cross in his service. In a word, they love Christ as a Redeemer from misery; but not as a Redeemer from the slavery of sin.

The case is far otherwise with all who have tasted that the Lord is gracious. To them Christ is precious in every office and character in which he is exhibited. They love him not merely as the author of their being; the benefactor from whose hand they receive all their earthly comforts; and the Redeemer who ransomed them from eternal perdition, and secured to them the final attainment of glory. Though this latter view of his character and work chiefly draws forth their gratitude, and fixes their supreme esteem; yet it is far from being the only ground of their attachment to Christ. They love him as their *Teacher*; delight to sit at his feet, and to hear the gracious words which flow from his lips; and daily look up to him for the guidance of his Holy Spirit. They love him as their *Lawgiver* and *King*; rejoice in the holiness of his laws; account his commandments not grievous, his yoke easy and his burden light; and rely on him for protection from sin, as well as deliverance from suffering. They love him as their *Advocate* with the Father; commit their cause to his infinitely wise and ever-successful management; and depend on his blood and intercession for an answer of peace to their prayers. They love him as their *Shepherd*, who with chastisements reclaims them from their wanderings, feeds them in

his green pastures, and refreshes them with his still waters;—their *Physician*, who, though he sometimes deeply probes their wounds, and gives them a bitter potion to drink, yet tenderly and skilfully heals their diseases;—their *Friend*, who loveth at all times, faithfully tells them their faults, and soothes not with flattery;—and their *Refiner*, who by fiery trials, as well as by his word and ordinances, and Holy Spirit, purifies them from their dross, and the defilement of their iniquities. In a word, they love Jesus with his cross, more than the tempting world with its kingdoms and crowns,—love him more than father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, houses and land; yea, more than their own life. They love to *read* of him in his word,—love to *hear* of him in his gospel,—love to *speak* of him with his people,—love to *think* of him in their daily meditations,—love to *pray* to him, and to celebrate his praises,—love to unite with their brethren in the commemoration of his death,—love to contemplate his supreme exaltation and glory,—and love to anticipate his second coming to be glorified in his saints, and admired in all them that believe. In their estimation he is the pearl of great price, and altogether lovely. And yet much as they do love him, they are sensible that they cannot love him enough. Often do they bewail the languor and coldness of their love to him; and, could they attain it, they desire that it should, even while they are on earth, be absolutely perfect.

3. A prevailing desire to be conformed to the image of Christ, is another feature of all saints.—No unrenewed man can unfeignedly desire to be made like Christ in any respect, except his exaltation

and happiness. Now that he is raised to a state of complete exemption from every kind and degree of suffering, and elevated to the highest pitch of honour and bliss; it is natural for every person to wish, in these respects to resemble him. But no stranger to the saving operations of the Spirit of Christ, can desire to be assimilated to him in holiness. So far from this, the very thought that all their depraved affections and dispositions should be eradicated, and all their sinful gratifications totally destroyed, would render them miserable. Much rather would they continue what they presently are, than be conformed in purity of heart and life to the image of Christ.

But the case is widely different with genuine saints. Of all such it is an invariable characteristic, that they love holiness. They love it on its own account, as well as because of its inseparable connexion with happiness. They love it as exemplified in the children of God, and study to become followers of them who through faith and patience are now inheriting the promises. But if it appears amiable in the disciples of Christ, in the best of whom it is seen accompanied with manifold imperfections; how much more amiable must it be in the person and example of Christ himself? Here it is exhibited in all the lovely attractions of spotless perfection. Here it is seen exemplified in human nature free from sin. Here they behold it imbodyed, and copied out by their best friend, for their imitation. His life was such an illustration of the precepts which he inculcated, that they see in it at once their practicability and alluring excellence. Every Christian virtue which it was possible for him who knew no sin to practise, was brightly portrayed in the tem-

per, and language, and demeanour of the Lord Jesus Christ; and while they contemplate them, they desire to be assimilated to his likeness.

This desire, common to all the children of God, has a powerful influence on their practice. It stimulates them to imitate his pattern, till their resemblance to him becomes so apparent, that men take knowledge of them that they have been with Jesus. Loving his image, as they do, and frequently and earnestly beholding it in the mirror of his word; “they are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” Taught to expect complete conformity to him, when he shall come to take them home to himself; with longing anticipations they pant for the attainment of this honour and bliss. They believe that “whom God did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son;”^{*} and that “as they have borne the image of the earthly Adam, they shall also bear the image of the heavenly.”[†] With the beloved disciple, therefore, they frequently join in saying, “It doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” And in the mean time, every one of them “that hath this hope in Christ, purifieth himself even as he is pure.”[‡]

4. Another evidence of a gracious state is, love to the word of God.—Persons who are destitute of every gracious principle can scarcely lay claim to this feature of godliness. In general, they feel a positive disrelish for the Bible. Left to follow their own choice, very seldom indeed, if ever, would it be in their hands. If they be at all given to reading,

^{*} Rom. viii. 29.

[†] 1 Cor. xv. 49.

[‡] 1 John iii. 2, 3.

they prefer far above it, the useless fictions of romance, and the pernicious delineations of vice and folly. Almost any thing else would they rather peruse, than the lively oracles of God.—It is possible indeed, that men who have never experienced the renovating power of the Holy Spirit, may attentively read the scriptures as an ancient history, and feel a kind of veneration for them on account of their antiquity, and beneficial effects on the interests of society. But they cannot love them because they are the word of God, the source of spiritual instruction and comfort, and calculated to make them wise to salvation. Their pure and holy precepts must ill accord with the propensities of their heart; and their awful threatenings, and denunciations of wrath against the workers of iniquity, must inspire them with aversion to the book in which they are contained.

In these respects there is a marked distinction between such characters, and the children of God. Of all writings, the latter esteem the Bible incomparably the most precious. Persuaded on the best of evidence that it is the word of God,—the evidence not only of miracles and prophecy, but also of its power to convince and to comfort the heart,—they revere it as his voice permanently addressing the sons of men. Loving him who thus speaks to them, they cannot but love this medium through which he converses with them, and the counsels of his unerring wisdom which it contains. “All scripture,” they believe, “is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”* Viewing these sacred records in this light,

they use them as the men of their counsels, and find them a source of instruction amid their perplexity, of consolation amid their sorrow, of light in darkness, and of support under all their afflictions. In the hours of retirement and solitude, they are their chief companion, and prove to them a never failing source of delight. They search them as for hid treasure, that they may learn more of the worth of Christ, more of their obligations to his redeeming love, more of the blessings made sure to them by promise; and more of the dangers to which they are exposed, and of the path of duty which they are required to pursue. Here they find themes of profitable meditation, and of sweet and heavenly songs in the night. With the prophet, therefore, they can cordially join in saying, “Thy words were found of me, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart.”* And to every line of these words of the Psalmist they can cordially subscribe; “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and the honey comb.” “O how love I thy law! it is my study all the day.”†—If you, my reader, thus love the word of God; treasure it up in your memory, and hide it in your heart; use it as a lamp to your feet, and a light to your path; and delight to meditate in it day

* Jer. xv. 16.

† Psalm xix. 7—10; cxix. 97.

and night,—you have cause to hope that God has put you among his children.

5. Another evidence of a gracious state is, love to the approved followers of Christ, for his sake.—The language of the apostle John on this subject is very explicit, “ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.”* In the foregoing chapter I have shown that it is possible for natural men to love some of the people of God on account of natural causes. But they cannot love them on account of their gracious qualifications and attainments. On the contrary, they will look on their strict and exemplary godliness as the most objectionable part of their character; and but for this, would like them much better.

The very reverse of this is the case with all genuine Christians. They love the professing and approved followers of Christ, because they give evidence that they are his people. They may esteem them on other accounts also of a natural kind. But above all, their hearts are attached to them, because they bear the image of Christ, and appear his living epistles, known and read of all men. The more brightly their resemblance to the Redeemer shines forth, in a life of distinguished holiness, the more do they love them. In this respect they differ widely from any formal pretender to piety. He would love them were they like himself, or only a little above him. But he cannot look with patience, and much less with pleasure, on their exalted godliness; and is ready to throw suspicion upon it, and to call it, “ being righteous over much.” Whereas, they who are themselves real saints, rejoice in the spiritual prosperity of their brethren,

* 1 John iii. 4.

and esteem them in love the more highly, the nearer they approach to perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.

This love to the brethren, which is a proof of spiritual life, is attested by its fruits. If you, my reader, be a partaker of it, you will seek after, and delight in, the society and religious converse of eminent saints, though they should be far beneath you in rank, or wealth. You will manifest a brotherly sympathy for them in their joys, and in their sorrows; weeping with them when they weep, and rejoicing with them when they rejoice. You will relieve their wants, according to your ability, not daring to shut up your bowels of compassion, and to put them off with fair words. You will protect their character against the persecuting calumnies of their enemies,—reprove their faults, and not suffer sin upon them,—and bear them upon your heart in your secret prayers to your heavenly Father.

6. Love to the Lord's day, and to the public ordinances of religion, constitutes another feature of the genuine Christian.—These two marks are here classed together, as they are so intimately and inseparably conjoined. Though distinct in themselves, yet they so blend into one another, that no person can love the sabbath, without at the same time loving the public ordinances of religion; and he who has a spiritual relish for the latter, at the same instant relishes the former.—They who are destitute of true godliness, cannot love the Lord's day on any other account, than as a season of respite from labour, or a time which they can command for amusement. Viewed as a holy rest,—a separation from all that is worldly in thought, and word, and deed, they cannot approve

of it; and for the religious services in which it ought to be employed, they can feel no spiritual relish. On the contrary, they account even the formal observance of them a burden and a weariness, unless they be clothed with some outward attractions.

Widely different is the case with all the children of God. The Lord's day is to them by far the most precious portion of their time. But for the return of this hallowed *rest*, the other days of the week would soon become a burden. It is this best of days which sweetens and sanctifies all other days. Regarding it as the day sacred to the memory of their Lord's resurrection from the dead; and the dear pledge of, and preparative for, the heavenly sabbath which remains for the people of God; they long for its return, hail its approach with delight, and with holy pleasure engage in its devotional services. Their hearts bound with joy when, by its arrival, it is said to them, "Go ye up to the house of the Lord." They know who has promised, "In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee." "The Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread: I will also clothe her priests with salvation; and her saints shall shout aloud for joy." "Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God: They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing;" — "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* Believing these promises, and animated with the

* Exod. xx. 24; Psalm cxxxii. 13—16; xcii. 13, 14; Matt. xviii. 20.

hope of those blessings which they insure—far from forsaking the assembling of themselves together, as the manner of some is, with conscientious regularity they meet with their Christian brethren, and gladly unite with them in the praises, prayers, and other religious services of the sanctuary. The sweet songs of Zion are the joy of their soul. In the joint prayers of many hearts they earnestly desire to unite, and to have an interest. The publication of the gospel is ever to them good news and glad tidings. And the commemoration of the death of Christ refreshes and strengthens them, to go on their way heavenward rejoicing.

Like all such, my reader, if you be a Christian indeed, you will love the Lord's day, and the public ordinances of his religion. From your heart you will be prepared to join in the language of the Psalmist, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it;"—"Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth;"—"How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee;"—"One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple."*

7. A farther evidence of a gracious state is, habitual endeavours to obey all God's commandments.—That obedience to the requirements of God's law is

* Psalm cxviii. 24; xxvi. 8; xxvii. 4.

a distinguishing feature of all saints, is amply attested in the sacred Scriptures. “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with their whole heart;”—“Not every one that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven;”—“He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me;”—“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”*

That unrenewed sinners may, as far as man can judge, yield something like an irreproachable obedience to the law of God, has been stated in the preceding chapter. At best, however, it differs in many important respects from this obedience which characterizes the sons of God, and by which every man should judge of his own state. These discriminating features of Christian obedience, by which it may easily be distinguished from that which is counterfeit, I shall briefly specify.—This obedience is *universal*; in other words, it extends to all God’s commandments. His children dare not select some of them which appear easiest to be observed, best suited to their inclinations and circumstances, or most calculated to support a good name, and to promote their worldly interests, and pass by others. How painful soever to flesh and blood compliance with some of them may be, they dare not, they will not, resist. Even when sacrifices are called for which resemble in painfulness the amputation of a right hand, or the plucking out of a right eye, they refuse not to obey

* Psalm cxix. 1, 2; John xiv. 21; Matt. vii. 21; Rev. xxii. 14.

the heavenly mandate. Far from making their peculiar humour, their secular interest, or the varying maxims and fashions of the world, the rule of their obedience, in all things they have a respect to the law of their God.—Their obedience is *sincere*. It is not a merely outward show, intended to catch the applause of men. It springs from the unfeigned purpose and desire of the heart. They tremble at the thought of attempting to practise imposition on Him, whose omniscient eye penetrates every recess of the soul.—Their obedience is *cheerful*. They act not like reluctant slaves, whose compliance with the will of their master is the result of compulsion and terror. They love their God and Redeemer with supreme esteem; and therefore not only account his service their duty, but feel it their pleasure. They run with alacrity in the way of his commandments, and experience it as their meat and their drink to do his will.—Their obedience is *uniform*. It is not confined to particular times and places. They are not saints in the church, and fiends at home,—one day all zeal and activity, and another coldness and indifference. On the contrary, amid all their imperfections, their conduct is in the main characterized by a steady evenness and uniformity. In prosperity as well as in adversity, in private and secret as well as in public, they prove that their actions are influenced by an abiding principle of holiness.—Their obedience is *persevering*. They do not for a season appear consistent, and afterwards fall away, even from their Christian profession. No! “The path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”* They hold on their way, and wax stronger and

* Prov. iv. 18.

stronger. Though they fall they are raised up again, and made to proceed in the path of duty with greater watchfulness and activity.—It flows from *respect for the authority of God*. They hear his voice in every requirement of his word, and with reverence bow to his commands. The daily inquiry of every one of them is, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” They dare not move in duty without his call; and when they hear his call, they dare not disobey.—It is performed with *a desire to promote the glory of God*. Looking on themselves not only as the creatures of his power, the subjects of his government, and daily debtors to his providential bounty, but above all, as his redeemed property; they account themselves bound to glorify him with their bodies and their spirits which are his. By their dutiful obedience they seek to promote, not only their own happiness, but his honour.—In fine, their obedience is performed, not in their own strength, but in reliance on the promised assistance of the Spirit of God. And, after their most assiduous diligence in aspiring after perfect conformity in heart and practice, to the will of God, they are denied to all dependence on what they have done.

By this sketch of Christian obedience, you, my reader, may judge of your own endeavours to obey the law of God. Unless it be characterized by the properties now specified, you have no ground to conclude that you are Christ's. Far am I from supposing that your obedience in all, or even in any one of these respects, must be perfect. But still, in some measure, this will be your exalted aim. The consciousness of your imperfections will not induce you, to rest satisfied with slender efforts and small attain-

ments. On the contrary, the language of Paul will be expressive of your sentiments and practice—"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."*

8. An evidence closely connected with the former is, a cordial approval of the spirituality and holiness of the divine law.—'This mark of a renewed heart has no counterfeit. They who are destitute of the spirit and power of godliness may say, with their lips, that they love the law of God on account of these excellencies; but they must be conscious that their heart contradicts their declaration. On these very accounts they dislike it, and their sincere wish is, that it were less spiritual and less holy; or rather, that it were not spiritual at all: that it extended only to outward actions, and were satisfied with a very small measure of obedience. "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."†

Not so with the genuine Christian. Conscious though he be of the imperfection and defilement inseparable from his best services, he does not wish the law narrowed in its demands, and accommodated to his circumstances. He loves the law of God as it is, and desires that he were enabled to reach its high standard, of pure and perfect obedience in heart and in practice. A striking exemplification of this we

* Philip. iii. 12—14.

† Rom. viii. 7.

have in the Apostle Paul. Speaking of the opposition between his remaining depravity, and the work of the Spirit of God in his heart, he says, "The law of God is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If, then, I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now, then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know, that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now, if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man."* Like Paul, every genuine saint approves of the spirituality and holiness of the law, at the very time he is conscious, that the remaining corruption of his nature leads him daily to violate its requirements.

9. Another evidence of a gracious state is, the spirit and practice of secret prayer.—It has often been remarked by theological writers, that fervent and believing prayer is one of the first indications of spiritual life. As Christ testified concerning Saul of Tarsus, immediately after his conversion, "Behold, he prayeth;" so it may be affirmed of all who are made spiritually alive. It is the very breath of the new born soul. "Because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying,

* Rom. vii. 12—22.

Abba, Father." "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. We know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."*

It is readily admitted, that hypocrites and mere formalists in religion may engage in the outward observance of prayer. The Pharisees prayed frequently. Like those rotten-hearted religionists, however, the prayers of such persons will chiefly be before men; while *secret* prayer will be little observed, or altogether neglected. And even when it is observed, it will be only the lifeless form of prayer, —the utterance of words, without any corresponding desires of the heart

Far otherwise is the case with the children of God. They, too, are not wanting in the public prayers of the church, the private prayers of the family, and the social prayers of them who fear the Lord. But, above all, they are characterized for secret prayer. They love, thus, unfettered by the presence of their fellow mortals, freely and unreservedly to pour out their hearts into the bosom of their Father and their God. To him they can, undisguisedly, and with full confidence of his listening to them with sympathetic interest, disclose all their secrets. This they esteem one of their highest privileges; and this is their daily and frequent practice. As naturally as little children go to their father with all their wants and complaints, tell him all their joys and sorrows, and cry to him for the redress of all their grievances; so naturally do the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty betake themselves to him in prayer. They

* Gal. iv. 6; Rom. viii. 15, 16.

humbly confess to him, and mourn over, all their sins; spread before him all their weaknesses and wants, their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows; cast upon him all their cares; thankfully acknowledge all his mercies; and supplicate his direction in all their engagements. Thus, “in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, they make their requests known unto God.”*—These secret prayers they present with deep humility and prostration of soul, under a sense of their unworthiness and guilt; with faith in the promise, that God will not withhold from them what he knows to be for their spiritual and eternal good; and looking to the blood and advocacy of Christ, as the ground on which they ask, and expect, mercy to pardon, and grace to help in the time of need. In fine, they pour out their confessions, supplications, and thanksgivings with heart-felt interest and holy fervour. Though this is not always the case, but on the contrary they sometimes experience languor in prayer; yet in the main their heart is in this work; and, assisted by the Spirit of God, they are enabled to perform it with ardent and importunate wrestling. Like Christ, “who in the days of his flesh, offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears;” they often present their prayers with a throbbing heart and tearful eye, amid “groanings which cannot be uttered.”

Now, my reader, as no one who is a stranger to this exercise can be in a state of grace, so if you are living in its observance, and especially if you have long persevered in this course, you have encouragement to hope that the Spirit of Christ dwelleth in you.

* Phil. iv. 6.

• 10. Resisting the thoughts and emotions of sin, is another feature of true piety.—This is an evidence of which there scarcely can be any counterfeit. The hypocrite and formalist may profess that they hate sin, and endeavour to banish every unhallowed thought and imagination, and that it is their study to cultivate purity of heart; but their conscience must tell them that this is false; and, that so far from being displeased with the thoughts and inward emotions of sin, they feel a satisfaction in their indulgence. While a regard to the good opinion of men makes them watchful over their outward conduct, they console themselves with the knowledge that, without losing their esteem, they can give loose reins to every thought and desire which can gratify their polluted soul. Thus, while “they make clean the outside of the cup and the platter, their inward part is full of ravening and wickedness.”*

The contrary of all this is the case with every genuine Christian. The purifying operations of the Spirit of God commence in the heart, the fountain of action. All, therefore, whose hearts he has savingly touched, are, in some measure, freed both from the defilement and the love of sin. It is hateful to them, not only in its outward appearance, but also in its most secret movements. When they feel it working within, stirring up evil thoughts, desires, affections, and passions, or picturing unholy scenes before the eye of the mind; they are filled with disquietude, and endeavour to repulse these unwelcome obtruders. Conscious of their inability for this, however, without the assistance of the Spirit of God, to him they cry for his promised aid. With David,

* Luke xi. 39.

their prayer is, "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash thou me, and I shall be whiter than the snow. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."* Thus, like him, "they hate vain thoughts;"† and, like him too, struggle against them, and flee to God for deliverance from them.

Now, my reader, as nothing but the saving work of the Spirit of God can produce this inward abhorrence, and determined resistance, of the thoughts and emotions of sin; if you be conscious that this is your experience, you have cause to believe that you are renewed in the spirit of your mind. Where this work has not been accomplished, habitual and determined opposition to sinful desires and imaginations cannot be felt and cherished.

11. Heavenly-mindedness, is another evidence of a gracious state.—The apostle Paul particularly mentions this as a feature of God's children. Contrasting their character with that of natural men, he thus expresses himself; "They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally-minded is death; but to be spiritually-minded is life and peace."‡

It is a well known law in the natural world, that the streams which flow from a fountain, cannot rise higher than the fountain itself. Exactly so it is with the flow of thought in the soul of man. While it remains in its natural state, such as it is when man is born of the flesh, it cannot ascend higher in the

* Psalm li. 2, 6, 7, 10.

† Psalm cxix. 113.

‡ Rom. viii. 5, 6.

current of its meditations, desires, and affections, than the pursuits and gratifications of the body. If left to pursue its native propensities, God, and heaven, and holiness, would not be in all its thoughts. Or should it at any time be forced, by external causes, to think for a few moments of eternity and the world beyond the grave; it is unhappy till again it be allowed to follow its favourite theme, and to dwell in its meditations on the things which are on earth. So true is the testimony of our Lord; “Where a man’s treasure is, there will his heart be also.”*

The same principle holds good with respect to the soul which is born from above. While “that which is born of the flesh, is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit, is spirit.”† As naturally in this case, as in the former, does the heaven-born soul ascend to that world from which it derived its spiritual life, and delights to dwell in meditating on those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. In that world lies the inheritance of the sons of God,—the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and which fadeth not away. In that world are gathered many of their dear brethren in the Lord; and there the whole family, in due time, shall be collected. In that world dwells Christ their Redeemer, the object of their supreme delight; “whom having not seen, they love; and in whom, though now they seem him not, yet believing, they rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”‡ In that world they expect to see him face to face, to abide for ever in his presence, and to be assimilated to him in holiness, glory, and bliss.—Say then, is it wonderful that they should be

* Matt. vi. 21.

† John iii. 6.

‡ 1 Pet. i. 8.

heavenly-minded? Rather, would it not be wonderful were it otherwise? Sooner shall the captive in a foreign land cease to think of the dear country and home from which he is severed; the wretched miser cease to think of his hoarded treasures; or the heir apparent of a crown and kingdom cease to think of the period when he shall ascend his throne,—than the children of God will live day after day, without feeling their hearts ascend to heaven. The cares, and business, and temptations of the world, may for a time fix their attention, engross their thoughts, and chain them to the dust. But anon they spring on high, like a bird escaped from the snare of the fowler, and enter the world where they desire eternally to dwell. Their meditations of heaven, and heavenly things, are so sweet and refreshing to their souls, that they delight to return to them, and break them off with reluctance. With the prophet they can appeal to God himself; “O Lord, the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee.”*

12. The last evidence of a gracious state which I shall here mention, is sincere concern for the salvation of others.—It is possible, indeed, that something which resembles this may be found in unregenerate men. They whose office it is to preach the gospel, though themselves in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity, unavoidably must sometimes utter verbal lessons, which call sinners to turn from the evil of their ways. And persons who are under qualms of conscience, or who wish to be thought very religious, may, on some rare occasions, manifest a kind of momentary desire to prevent the everlasting misery

* Isa. xxvi. 8.

of the giddy and wicked around them. But neither of these can experience a sincere and settled concern for the salvation of any one. The truth is, that no man can be truly desirous of this, while he himself continues under the thralldom of sin. Whatever he may say to the contrary, his conscience must bear witness against him.

They, on the contrary, who have experienced the riches of Divine mercy, are made deeply and abidingly solicitous that all about them should participate of the same blessings. Taught of God to see their own perilous condition while without Christ, they cannot shut their eyes against the awful danger to which others in that state are exposed, and refrain from earnestly warning them to escape. And knowing, as they do, the preciousness of Christ, the value of the blessings of his grace, and the free offer of them which is made to the chief of sinners; they are constrained to beseech them not to neglect this great salvation. As Moses said to Hobab, so they speak to every careless sinner around them; "We are journeying to the place of which the Lord has said, I will give it you; come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel."* Like the woman of Samaria, their language to all such is, "Come, see a man who told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?"† And like Andrew they study to act, concerning whom it is testified, that as soon as he had become acquainted with Christ, "he first findeth his own brother, Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus."‡

* Numb. x. 29.

† John iv. 29.

‡ John i. 41, 42.

Like these characters, my reader, if you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, you will experience and manifest a concern for the salvation of others, especially those of your own house. You will find it impossible to be silent and unconcerned, day after day, and year after year, while you behold them heedlessly travelling in the broad way which leads to destruction. Unwelcome though your friendly counsel and reproof may be, and requited though your love to them should be with hatred; you will warn them of their danger, and endeavour to prevent their everlasting ruin. If a husband, you will discover solicitude for the salvation of your wife,—or if a wife, you will be fervently desirous of the salvation of your husband. If a parent, you will travail as in birth for your children, that Christ may be formed in them, the hope of glory. In fine, in every relation of life, whether as a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a master or a servant, as far as you are able, you will seek to commend Christ to your kindred and connexions. By frequent instruction and affectionate counsel,—by putting into their hands suitable books,—by bringing them in the way of religious company and conversation,—by taking them along with you, when you can, to the public ordinances of the gospel,—by the light of your own pious example,—and by frequent and fervent prayer to the Lord, you will endeavour to bring them to Christ.

Thus I have set before you, I trust, a sufficient number of plain Scripture evidences of a gracious state, to enable you to judge what is your true character.* Though you may not be able to lay claim

* See a number of additional evidences in Chapter Ninth.

to all of them, yet if you see that some of them are descriptive of your condition and habitual practice, you are a child of God, and have much cause to give glory to the Lord for his rich and distinguishing grace to your soul. Watchfully guard against spiritual pride, and indolent security. More and more aspire after higher attainments in the divine life, and fuller and clearer evidences that you are an heir of a celestial crown and kingdom. Press on towards the mark of Christian perfection, and after a few more efforts you shall obtain possession of glory, honour, and immortality, eternal life.

But should you, after careful and repeated trials, find nothing at all in these evidences which you can apply to yourself, you have too much ground to fear the worst of your state. Long though you may have been at ease in your mind, and thought favourably of your case, be assured, on the authority of God's testimony, that you are none of Christ's. Though possessed of a name to live, you are spiritually dead. Your condition is more eminently perilous than that of openly profligate and presumptuous sinners. They dare not flatter themselves that they are on the road to heaven; but you have done so, while on the road to hell. Unless you can be aroused to a sense of your awful danger, your everlasting perdition is inevitable. To effect your awakening, therefore, in as far as human instrumentality is concerned, let me solicit your serious attention to the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

ADDRESS TO THOSE WHO HAVE NO GENUINE EVIDENCE OF A GRACIOUS STATE.

1. If you are destitute of all the evidences in the preceding Chapter, be assured you are still in a state of condemnation. — 2. Your present condition is peculiarly dangerous. — 3. Your punishment shall be dreadful if you die in your present state. — 4. You are not yet without hope. — 5. There is no safety for you except in Christ. — 6. Christ is able to save the very chief of sinners. — 7. Christ will save you, and all who come to him. — 8. Let these truths be your encouragement, O sinner, flee to Christ, and believe in him, and you shall be saved. — 9. Give yourself no rest till you have ground to conclude that you are truly a believer in Christ.

It is more than probable that some who have perused the preceding chapter, must be conscious that they are destitute of all claim to the evidences of a gracious state there mentioned. The utmost of their religious attainments may not surpass, if they even reach so far, as those marks which I have endeavoured to prove are utterly fallacious. So far from being able to trace in themselves the features of the children of God, they may be forced to say, that, after the most careful trial, they cannot perceive in themselves even one indisputable evidence of true godliness. Too many persons of this description have in all ages existed in the Christian church. While possessed of a name to live, they have been spiritually dead:—while holding the form of godliness, they have been destitute of its spirit and power. If this

condition, my reader, be yours, permit me, as a messenger of mercy, compassionately to address you in the name of the Lord, and to set before you both your danger, and the way by which you may be saved.

1. Be assured you are still in a state of condemnation.—Do not attempt to lull yourself into security, by supposing that after all you have read on this subject, the writer may be deceived, and your spiritual condition may be much better than he has represented. Do not flatter yourself, that though you cannot honestly say you possess any of the characteristic marks of a gracious state which he has specified; yet there may be others, lower and easier to reach, which, if you know them, would fill you with hope.—Let me remind you, that in this important inquiry it is not with man that you have to deal, but with God. If the writer have mentioned any thing as a test of vital piety, not found in the sacred Scriptures, you ought to reject it as an unhallowed imposition. But if he have specified none except those which are delineated by the Spirit of God, who cannot deceive, or be deceived; you must abide by *His* infallible decision. And that this is the accredited stamp of all the evidences above enumerated, you cannot deny.—Nor is the writer aware that any genuine evidences, which are lower and easier to reach, are contained in the sacred volume. Gladly would he avail himself of any such, were they to be found there, that he might better meet the case of the weakest believer in the household of faith. But while he readily admits that there are many other evidences of a gracious state in the Bible, besides those which he has considered, he will venture to

affirm, that none of them will be found applicable to those who cannot apply to themselves some of those he has specified. Several of them are essential to the existence of a Christian in his very weakest estate. The babe in grace cannot exist without reliance on the righteousness of Christ,—unfeigned love to him, his word, and his people,—endeavours to honour him by obeying his commandments,—the spirit and practice of prayer,—and concern for the salvation of others.

Now, since you are conscious that you are destitute of these evidences of Christian character, you cannot be a real believer in Christ. Your religious profession, how long soever you have retained it, and how well soever it has been supported by appearances before men, is nothing better than mere pretence. Still you are like a body without a soul. You want the vital and actuating principle of a Christian. You are a stranger to that great renovating change which is indispensably necessary to the formation of a believer in Christ; and without which all your avowals of faith in him are insincere and unavailing. The language of the Bible on this subject is universally and immutably true—"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God;"—"If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his;"—"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new;"—"In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love."*

Your present condition, therefore, is a state of con-

* John iii. 3; Rom. viii. 9; 2 Cor. v. 17; Gal. v. 6.

demnation. "He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is *condemned already*, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."* Yes, you are not simply exposed to the danger of condemnation at a future period; but already the sentence has gone forth against you, and shall assuredly be executed, if you continue in your present state. Not only are you chargeable with manifold violations of the law of God, the smallest of which is sufficient to subject you to his righteous displeasure; but, above all, you are guilty of *unbelief*. God has published to you his testimony respecting pardon and eternal life through the blood of his Son; and assured you, that without an interest in him you must everlastingly perish. But you have not believed his testimony, and consequently have treated the God of truth as if he were a liar! Never have you to this moment in good earnest viewed yourself in a perishing and helpless condition. Never have you to this moment believed your indispensable need of Christ, and his ability and willingness to save. Say, then, has not God just ground to be angry with you, and to condemn you for thus discrediting his word, and virtually impeaching him with telling you a falsehood? Would not you be offended with that man, who would impeach your truest averments, and treat them as a lie? And yet you have thus dealt with the Lord God Almighty, by refusing his testimony concerning eternal life through his Son! Your guilt, therefore, is fearfully aggravated; and the sentence of the violated law, which hangs over you, is additionally confirmed.—Seriously reflect on your truly alarming state. The curse of God's law,

* John iii. 18.

rendered more than doubly heavy, by the sin of unbelief, pursues you wherever you go. It binds you over to "a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries." Nor is there any possibility for you to escape, except by cordially believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Your present condition is peculiarly dangerous. —This, you must admit, is characteristic of the state of every unpardoned sinner. But in a special manner it is so with those who, to their other iniquities, have added that of a false and hypocritical profession of faith in Christ. By this they have drawn a veil between themselves and the awful gulf which lies before them; and, though standing on its dizzy brink, and every moment in hazard of being precipitated into the overwhelming abyss, yet see not their terrible peril. Commonly they soon begin to feel as if they were safe, and gradually are lulled into a lethargic security. While they view others who have no religious profession, and who observe no religious duties, as certainly exposed to everlasting perdition, they persuade themselves that this cannot be their case. They have honoured Christ by calling him their Master, and they frequently honour him by the performance of religious services. They are Christians already, and are recognized as such by all good men. Why, therefore, should they trouble themselves by questioning the sincerity of their profession?

Similar to this was the case with the Pharisees. They were not like the infidel Sadducees around them, who openly avowed their disbelief of the fundamental truths of revelation. They both professed their faith in the word of God, and they practised

its requirements. They regularly attended public worship in the temple and in the synagogues,—daily prayed at the hours of the morning and evening sacrifices,—fasted very frequently,—payed tithes with more than required scrupulosity,—and liberally gave alms to the poor. In consequence of all this, they were esteemed by their countrymen as persons of the most eminent and exemplary sanctity. And so high was the opinion which they entertained of their own holiness, that they looked down with pity and scorn on all who were not of their own party. “They trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” And yet, after all, Christ pronounced them the rankest hypocrites, and denounced against them the heaviest woes. He told them to their face; that they were like whited sepulchres; beautiful without, but within full of noisome putrefaction. And to impress their minds with the awful danger of their condition, he assured them that publicans and harlots were nearer the kingdom of God than they;—in other words, that the most notorious and profligate sinners were more open to conviction, and more likely to become converts, than these self-righteous and secure religionists.

How applicable to your case is all this! Like those deluded men you are hedged round with a religious profession, and already are, or at least are not far from becoming, secure in the midst of danger. While the voice of God in his word deeply pierces the conscience and heart of many a sinner around you—fills them with trembling alarm, and restless solicitude for salvation—and excites them gladly to flee to Christ, the only refuge set before them; it falls pointless on your callous and fortified soul. You put it from your-

self, and apply it to others. In your own estimation you are whole, and therefore need not the aids of the heavenly Physician. And you are in awful hazard of continuing in this state, till you sleep the sleep of death. In terrible judgment God may give you up to blindness and obduracy, and say concerning you, as he formerly spake respecting the members of the Jewish church, "Go and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed."*

3. Your punishment shall be dreadful, if you die in your present state.—You need not to be informed, that the duration of your life is altogether uncertain—so fearfully uncertain, that you have no security for another moment beyond the present. The next may come to you fraught with the message of death, and may hurry you without delay into the presence of your Judge. Or, should you be spared for many years to come, but these, like those which are past, be spent in your present unbelieving condition, your prospects for eternity, so far from being brightened, would then be darker than they now are. An additional load of guilt would subject you to increased punishment. And horrible beyond conception shall be the eternal doom of unbelievers!

The misery of those, in any case, who shall be consigned to hell, must be dreadful. But that which shall be inflicted on persons like you, who have been favoured with the light of the gospel, and who have

* Isa. vi. 9, 10.

professed to believe it, while yet they have continued in unbelief, we are assured shall be peculiarly great. Our blessed Lord taught this—"Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee."*

Seriously think how awfully intolerable your punishment must be. Christ has taught in your hearing by his servants—exhibited the faithful record of his mighty works before your eyes—and often graciously entreated you to accept the blessings of his great salvation. But notwithstanding your fair professions you have been deaf to his voice, blind to his wonderful deeds, and rejected his offers of pardon and life. More tolerable, therefore, shall it be in the great day of final retribution for those who were swallowed up amid fiery judgment, than for you. In vain will it then be for you to cry to the Redeemer, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name"—professed to believe thy truth—perhaps taught it to others—and joined with thy people in worshipping thee? To you he will reply in these appalling terms,

* Matt. xi, 20—24.

“ I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity;”—“ Because I have called, and ye have refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded: but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall ye call upon me, but I will not answer; ye shall seek me early, but ye shall not find me: For that ye hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord. Ye would none of my counsel, ye despised all my reproof: therefore shall ye eat of the fruit of your own way, and be filled with your own devices.”*

Under anticipations so truly fearful, well may your heart meditate terror. O horrific consideration! that very Redeemer who now compassionately and patiently waits upon you, expostulates with you, and beseeches you to come to him for salvation, will then be deaf to your cry, and, with a voice of terrible majesty, command you to depart! Yes! from his presence you shall be driven, and from the glory of his power, whom you were accustomed to call Master and Lord; and all that celestial bliss of which you often heard, and the hope of which you professed to cherish, shall be entirely hid from your view. Fair and promising as your prospects once seemed to be, they shall then be totally and for ever darkened. All the ineffable glory, honour, and felicity of heaven shall be lost; and all the consummated degradation, infamy, and wretchedness of hell shall be found. Your dwelling shall be the adamantine prison of

* Prov. i. 21—31.

darkness, the gates of which shall close upon you, never to be opened, and into which the faintest ray of hope cannot penetrate. Your companions shall be the devil and his angels, and the basest refuse of human kind. Your employment shall be weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth—the agonizing bitterness of remorse, and the unavailing shrieks of despair. The worm that dieth not shall unceasingly gnaw your soul, and the fire of your torment shall be unquenchable.—These, my dear reader, are not pictures drawn by heated imagination, and gloomy superstition. They are delineated by the pencil of inspiration—they are the true sayings of God. “Let sinners, therefore, in Zion be afraid; let fearfulness surprise the hypocrites: who among us shall dwell with devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?”*

4. Eminently dangerous as your condition is, and dreadful as your punishment must be, if you continue in your present state—you are not yet without hope.—The glorious gospel of Christ, to which you have often listened, but which you have not hitherto believed, is a publication by the King of heaven, of good news and glad tidings to all sinners of the human race. It proclaims a full, a free, and an irreversible pardon to every transgressor who is willing to cast down the weapons of his rebellious warfare against Heaven, and to submit himself to the authority of Jesus Christ, as his Ransomer and rightful Lord. Its blessed announcement, as preached by the lips of Christ himself, thus addresses all—“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but

* Isa. xxxiii. 14.

have everlasting life.”* This is the sum and substance of the whole revelation of mercy, unfolded in the sacred volume. The *world*—every man upon earth—is here represented in a perishing condition. Viewing them in this miserable and helpless state, God loved them, and determined to accomplish their redemption. And so incomparably great was his love to our race, that, when nothing less could effectuate this, in consistency with the rectitude of his government, and the glory of his attributes, he gave his only begotten Son to obey and suffer in their stead, “the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” In consequence of all this, every one without exception, who believes in Christ—unfeignedly credits God’s testimony concerning him, as the only and the all-sufficient Saviour, and as the native effect of this, receives and rests on him for salvation, “shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

This is the good news and glad tidings which the gospel publishes to all people. And good news it must be to every one who is truly persuaded that he is in a perishing condition. It is because men do not believe this, that they treat the message of salvation with cold indifference. If they did believe that they are sinners, and as such are certainly and inevitably exposed to everlasting misery,—the penalty which God has annexed to sin,—they could not slight the gospel. They would be compelled to cry out, “What shall we do to be saved?” Sooner might we suppose, that a person believed his house was on fire, while yet he lay composedly on his couch, without any cry of danger, or attempt to escape the devouring flames; than that any man believes himself

* John iii. 16.

exposed to the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, and yet disregards the announcement of a way to safety. Those who act in this manner may say that they believe they are guilty, condemned, and perishing sinners, and that they do not remember ever to have doubted this; but their conduct proves the falsehood of their assertion. The truth is, no man can sincerely believe that he is in this awful and alarming condition, till the eyes of his understanding be opened to see it, by the agency of the Spirit of God. His work it is to convince men of sin,—to discover to them its native malignity and immense evil, and the danger to which it has subjected them. And to all in whom he thus works, the message of salvation is fraught with joy. Every one of them is prepared to join with an apostle in testifying concerning it, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief.”*

In pursuance of this deeply interesting subject, I would claim your serious attention to a few additional particulars.

5. Study to have your mind impressed with the conviction, that there is no safety for you except in Christ.—The sacred scriptures leave no room for doubt on this point. Our blessed Redeemer himself declares, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved.”† In harmony with their Divine Master his apostles testify, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.” “For

* 1 Tim. i. 15.

† John xiv. 6; x. 9.

there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all.”* Agreeably to all this, when they preached the gospel to sinners, they invariably pointed them to Christ as the only hope set before them. Far from leaving anxious inquirers amid doubt and perplexity, in the plainest and most encouraging terms they directed every one of them to the blood of Jesus, as the only foundation of pardon and acceptance with God. Their language was, “Be it known unto you, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all who believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”†

Now, on this fundamental point your mind ought to be well established. The heart of every man naturally inclines him to look to other grounds of hope besides Christ. The goodness and general mercy of God,—the assumption that they are not so great sinners as others,—their tears and repentance,—and their deeds of morality and piety, are confidently relied on by multitudes, in preference to the blood of Christ. And even after men are driven from these quagmire foundations, and dare no longer rest solely on any one of them, or all of them collectively; it is no easy matter to bring them to a total relinquishment of these grounds of trust. While they profess to believe that “other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ;”‡ still they feel a bias to lean on something else, and to expect salvation, chiefly from the Redeemer, but also partly from what they had promised utterly to abandon.—

* Acts iv. 12.; 1 Tim. ii. 5, 6. † Acts xiii. 38, 39. ‡ 1 Cor. iii. 11.

Apprised of this, let it be your care to watch against a spirit and practice so dishonouring to Christ, and dangerous to the souls of men. His work is perfect. The sacrifice which he offered is of infinite value. It will not admit of any addition. Either you must rest on it, and it alone, or you can have no sure ground of confidence for eternity.

6. Endeavour to be well grounded in this truth, that Christ is able to save the very chief of sinners.— This is a truth of supreme importance. Since Christ is the only Saviour of sinners, and no hope can arise to them from any other source, they would require to be well assured that he is qualified for this arduous office. And, blessed be God, the evidence by which it is confirmed is ample and most satisfactory. Let us hear the testimony of the Spirit of God. The prophet Isaiah, speaking concerning Christ, says; “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” And, in another place, he introduces Christ replying to questions put concerning him; “Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.”* Our Redeemer declares concerning himself, “I give unto my sheep eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My Father, who gave them me, is greater than all; and none is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand. I and my Father are one.”† And Paul, in his

* Isa. ix. 6. ; lxiii. 1.

† John x. 28.

epistle to the Hebrews, to point out the infinite superiority of Christ's priesthood to that of his typical predecessors, after ascribing to him immortal existence, adds; "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."*

Additional confirmation of this truth is derived from the wonderful constitution of his person as *Immanuel*. Possessed of supreme Deity, as well as real humanity, nothing can be too hard for him to accomplish. He who spake the universe into existence, and formed its innumerable inhabitants by a simple act of his will, must be competent to save. To doubt this, would be to question his Omnipotence, who thus testifies of himself, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."†—This truth is confirmed by the dignity and supreme dominion to which he is exalted, and the universal government which he exercises. As the merited reward of his mediatorial obedience and sufferings, he is raised to the highest throne in heaven, and vested with unlimited control over all creatures. Him hath God "set at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church."‡ Can he who guides the complicated movements of the universe, and governs every creature in heaven and on earth, find any difficulty in saving those who put their trust in him?—

* Heb. vii. 25.

† Rev. i. 8.

‡ Eph. i. 20—22.

In fine, this truth is farther confirmed by numerous examples, recorded in the sacred scriptures. Here we read of some of the most flagitious and profligate sinners, plucked by him as brands from the fire. The case of the idolatrous and bloody Manasseh, king of Judah,—the unchaste woman of Samaria,—the thief who was crucified along with Christ,—the persecuting Saul of Tarsus,—and of several of the most notorious transgressors at Corinth; all brightly display the power, as well as the riches of his grace.

With these proofs before you, of the Redeemer's ability to save the very chief of sinners, you cannot reasonably fear that your case is beyond his reach. No! The extremest case which can occur, is not worse than that of some who have already obtained mercy. The most aggravated pitch of guilt which any sinner can reach on this side of the grave, is not too great for him to pardon. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin."*

7. Attentively and seriously consider, that Christ is willing to save you, and all who come to him.—This is a glorious and most encouraging truth,—a truth which shines so clearly in every page of the gospel, that we should think it impossible for any man, acquainted with the Bible, to question it for a moment. Yet it is often far otherwise. That man who has nothing but a speculative acquaintance with the scheme of salvation, finds it an easy matter to assure others, who are alarmed with a sense of their guilt and danger, that Christ is cordially willing to save all who apply to him. But should that man be brought under efficacious convictions of sin, he finds it a difficult thing to believe it in reference to him-

* 1 John i. 7.

self. So vast in number, and complicated in their enormity, do his sins of heart and practice appear to him, that he accounts himself the chief of sinners; and is ready to conclude that never did, and never will, any such as he is obtain mercy. He cannot doubt that Christ is willing to save others, but can hardly believe that he is willing to save him.—This is a case exceedingly common. And in such circumstances, Satan, by his suggestions, busily endeavours to strengthen the natural unbelief of the heart, with a view to keep men, if possible, from looking to Christ, or to hurry them into the gloom of despair.

To be prepared to meet this, study to have your mind deeply impressed with the evidences of Christ's willingness to save all who come to him. This cheering truth appears from his own *declarations*, respecting the design of his mission into our world: "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* If you are a sinner, therefore,—a lost sinner, you are among those whom he came to save.—It is amply and explicitly confirmed by his *invitations* and *promises*. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." "Look unto me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else,—a just God, and a Saviour; there is none beside me." "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat," &c. "Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink." "Come

* Matt. xviii. 11; ix. 13.

unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."* Language cannot speak more plainly, and encouragement cannot be given more fully, and more without restriction, than in these exceeding great and precious calls and promises. Every son of Adam is addressed by them, and affectionately and earnestly entreated to come to Christ, with an explicit assurance that he shall meet with a welcome reception.

To question Christ's willingness to save you, notwithstanding these declarations and promises, would be an impeachment of his truth. It would be to treat him as if he were not sincere in his offers, and after exciting your hopes, might leave you to disappointment and sorrow. But our Redeemer "is not a man that he should lie, or the son of man that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?"† "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever," in the truth of his promise, as well as the immutability of his nature. Sooner shall heaven and earth pass away, than one jot or tittle of his word shall fail of its accomplishment.

8. Let these truths be impressed on your mind, and, as a perishing sinner, flee to Christ, and believe in him, and you shall be saved.—With this part of my address, at first view you may be somewhat startled. It may appear to you like a command to

* Isa. i. 18; xlv. 22; lv. i; John vii. 37; Mat. xi. 28; John vi. 37; Re. xxii. 17.

† Numb. xxiii. 19.

perform an impossibility. Had you been called simply to observe the use of means, and to leave the issue to God; you would have deemed this perfectly reasonable. But to require you to believe in Christ, you may account a hard saying,—a charge altogether unreasonable. And, like many, you may be disposed to treat it with neglect, and to assign as your reason for such conduct,—“ I cannot believe in Christ.”

Let me caution you, my dear reader, to beware of satisfying yourself with such an argument for disobeying a divine commandment. Look to your Bible. What saith the scriptures on this subject? When the awakened and trembling keeper of the prison at Philippi cried to Paul and Silas, “ What shall I do to be saved?” what was their answer? They addressed to him the very same charge which I have given to you, “ Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved.”* And in similar terms our glorious Redeemer expressed himself to the blind and unbelieving Jews,—“ While ye have the light, (plainly meaning himself, the light of the world) believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light.”† It is, therefore, the duty of every sinner who hears the gospel, to believe in Christ; and the neglect of it, by wilfully continuing in unbelief, subjects to condemnation. “ He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”‡

Your plainly commanded duty is to believe God’s record concerning eternal life through his Son; and nothing short of this is required of you. The use of means, it is true, is also your duty; and, without these, you cannot at all believe in Christ. You must

* Acts xvi. 31.

† John xii. 36.

‡ Mark xvi. 16.

first have read, or heard, the record which you are to believe, and must understand its meaning. "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"* But you are not to sit down satisfied with the use of means; and, after you have carefully studied what you are called to believe, to say, in language which is too common,—“I can do no more: I must wait till the Spirit of God enable me to believe.” With such a sentiment as this you are not to satisfy your conscience, and quietly to remain at ease, as if no blame attached to you, after you have used means, notwithstanding you are still in unbelief. Nay, verily, while this is your condition, you are chargeable with the most aggravated sin,—the sin of discrediting God’s testimony, and that in a matter which involves your all for eternity. While you continue in unbelief, that very unbelief is your greatest sin.—What is it, I ask you, that hinders you from believing in Christ? You dare not say that it is any *physical* or *natural* inability, for in this case unbelief could not be your sin. An infant, or an idiot, is naturally unable to believe, and therefore cannot be charged with unbelief. But your inability is of a *moral* kind. It is neither less nor more than your *unwillingness* to believe,—the aversion of your heart to the truth. You love the darkness, and you hate the light. You will not truly admit the soul-humbling conviction that you are undone for eternity, unless you be saved by Christ.—You yourself being judge, I ask therefore, Is not this criminal! Is it not opposition of heart to God’s

* Rom. x. 14.

matchless love in the gift of his Son, and indifference to your own spiritual and eternal interests?

That the agency of the Holy Spirit is necessary to remove this opposition and enmity of heart to divine truth, I readily admit. His work it is to enlighten the understanding to see the mighty, the infinite importance of God's testimony in the gospel; and in connexion with this, to remove the opposition of the will, and to excite to a prompt and cordial compliance with the call of Christ. And it were well if you were deeply convinced that you are eternally undone, unless you experience his illuminating and renewing operations in your soul. It would be a hopeful symptom that you are not far from deliverance.—But what I wish here to impress on your mind is, that the want of these does not exempt you from blame. Your unbelief is your sin, while you continue under it, and a sin of the most deeply aggravated nature; and your imperative duty is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

To prevent, or to remove misapprehensions respecting the nature of faith, it may be proper to state here, that it means simply, *the belief of the truth*. The terms faith and believing are used by the writers of the Sacred Scriptures, in the very same acceptance, when applied to divine things, as when they refer to the things of this world. The difference arises from the things which are to be believed, and not from the act of the mind in believing them. In the one case it is the things of God,—divine truth, supported by a divine and infallible testimony. And in the other, it is the things of men, attested by evidence which is merely human. The act of the mind in believing both the one and the other, is the same:

it is crediting a testimony which we account true.—Nor is it any objection to this simple view of faith, that the inspired penmen sometimes speak of “believing with the heart,” and “with all the heart.” These phrases mean nothing more than sincere, unfeigned, and cordial believing; in opposition to insincere, feigned, and hypocritical pretensions to believing.

According to this plain statement, to believe in Christ, means unfeignedly to credit God’s testimony concerning him, as the Saviour of sinners. This includes the belief of your own guilty and perishing condition,—of God’s compassion and love to our race, manifested in the gift of his Son,—of Christ’s supreme Deity, and his assumption of human nature, that he might be fitted to obey and suffer for our redemption,—of the infinite value of his sacrifice, and God’s acceptance of it as the ground of pardon and eternal life,—and of his ability and willingness freely to bestow these blessings, on every one who trusts in him for their attainment.—Now, what can be more reasonable than that you should believe all this, on the testimony of the God of truth, who cannot lie? And what can be more unreasonable and criminal than to refuse to believe it? Is not this to treat the manifold wisdom of God in the scheme of redemption, as if it were foolishness? Is it not to impeach his veracity, as if it were unworthy of your credit? Is it not to trifle with your dearest interests for eternity, and to reject the only way of salvation?

Here, however, I wish it to be distinctly understood and carefully remembered, that though faith in Christ consists in unfeignedly crediting God’s testimony concerning him as the Saviour of sinners; yet

it is not simply a cold, and passive, and barren assent to this truth, as when we believe a common historical fact. On the contrary, faith in Christ is accompanied with the deepest and most lively interest. The whole soul is aroused to activity. All the powers of the mind are awakened, and their energies directed to, and concentrated in, the attainment of salvation. Nor can it be otherwise. It arises out of the very nature of the case.—This may be illustrated by a familiar example. Were we informed that a poor stranger in a foreign land had been found heir of an immensely rich estate, we would hear and believe it with indifference. But were intelligence, which we could not doubt, brought to us that we ourselves were discovered to be heirs of it; how differently would we be affected with this belief? We would receive the evidence with deep interest and lively joy.—Somewhat analogous to this is the case with respect to the belief of the gospel. While we are in unbelief, we hear of others who have found Christ, the pearl of great price, and we are little concerned. But when we ourselves are brought to believe in him, and have found him as our enriching portion, we are filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory. We then truly account the message of the gospel “like cold water to a thirsty soul, or good news from a far country.” Gladly do we flee to Christ as our refuge from coming wrath; and most willingly do we put our trust in him for pardon, justification, and eternal life. Esteeming him all-precious—infinitely precious, we cordially receive him into the throne of our heart, and unreservedly devote ourselves to his service.

In fine, faith in Christ, when unfeigned, is always

operative. It is not an empty name,—a dead and unprofitable profession. “It works by love;”—love to God the Father, for the unspeakable gift of his Son; to Christ, for the matchless display of his condescension and grace; to the Holy Spirit, for applying the blessings of salvation; to all the professing and approved disciples of Jesus; and to his blessed word, his hallowed day, and the institutions of his house. “It overcometh the world;” rises superior to its terrors and allurements; spurns its ill-gotten riches and honours, and forbidden pleasures; and refuses to adopt its pernicious maxims, and to follow its contaminating fashions. It purifies the heart; frees it from the secret love of sin; makes it hate vain thoughts and imaginations, and produces a fixed desire after holy and heavenly meditations. It is productive of good works,—excites all who are partakers of it, from reverence to the authority of the Lawgiver, and concern for his honour, to run in the way of his commandments, and to abound in the fruits of righteousness. Nor is any faith worthy of this name, unless it be productive of these effects. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

9. Give yourself no rest till you have ground to conclude that you are truly a believer in Christ.—To attain this is the principal design of your being. If you come short of it, better far would it have been for you, that you had never been called into existence. Let no pains, therefore, be accounted too great, to have your mind deeply impressed with this conviction; and for this purpose, patiently and frequently review all the foregoing sections of this chapter. Meditate frequently on your guilty and

condemned condition, as a sinner chargeable with innumerable transgressions, and all these crowned with unbelief. Think of the peculiar danger of continuing in this state, till God in righteous judgment may give you up, and leave you in obduracy and impenitence. Consider how ineffably terrible your final punishment shall be, should death overtake you in your present state, and hurry you into the presence of a justly offended and Almighty Judge. Often look at the wonderful exhibition of mercy which the gospel presents to your view; and reflect on that stupendous love of God which induced him to give up his only begotten Son to ignominy, suffering, and death, rather than leave our rebellious world to perish. Contemplate the grace and condescension of Christ, “who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”* Be assured that there is no salvation for you in any other but Christ, and that either you must be saved by him, or suffer the eternal damnation of hell. Often meditate on the almighty power of Christ to save to the uttermost; and his willingness to deliver you from ruin, and to raise you to the dignity and happiness of a son of God, and an heir of glory. And frequently listen to his gracious and affectionate calls and entreaties addressed to sinners, to believe in his name, and to put their trust in him for pardon and life.—By these means you will see what it is you are required to believe, both with

* Phil. ii. 6—8.

respect to yourself and concerning the glorious Redeemer. And, humbled to the dust, under the consciousness of the guilty aversion of your heart to comply with Heaven's call, look up as a helpless and perishing transgressor to the Holy Spirit, to destroy this opposition, and to make you willing in the day of his power. Cry to him, with earnest and persevering prayer, to illuminate your darkened mind, and to enable you to view these truths in all their native importance. Fervently beseech him "who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, to shine into your heart, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." Nor desist from this work till you have obtained your suit, and are enabled to say, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

CHAPTER VII.

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION.

Different opinions concerning assurance of salvation.—1. It has been attained by many.—2. The sacred scriptures exhort us to seek it, and encourage us to expect it.—3. The Bible furnishes us with numerous marks of Christian character to aid us in arriving at the knowledge of our state. 4. The Holy Spirit witnesses with the hearts of God's children respecting their interest in Christ.—5. Assurance is not inseparably connected with faith in Christ, and therefore not a common attainment of genuine believers.—6. None but saints of eminent holiness can ordinarily reach it.—7. After it is obtained, for a season it may be obscured or lost.—8. As it may be obtained by every believer, so none should rest satisfied without diligently seeking it.

IN the chapter preceding the last, it was affirmed, that all who possess the evidences of a gracious state which are there delineated, have ground to believe that they are the regenerated children of God. To be assured of this, is one of the highest attainments which any Christian can reach, while a sojourner on earth. As, however, many false representations of what is called, *the Doctrine of Assurance*, are very prevalent, and those who have not carefully studied the subject, may be in danger of being misled by them; it may be of advantage to some readers to exhibit here a short view of its scriptural nature.

Assurance of salvation, or a man's undoubting belief that he is savingly interested in the Lord Jesus Christ, is a doctrine respecting which professed Chris-

tians have long entertained opinions widely different. Some boldly affirm that its attainment is impossible. While they admit that inspired men, whose office and qualifications were extraordinary, did possess this assurance; they maintain that it is presumptuous for any one to imagine that it is now attainable, and that all pretensions to it are nothing better than enthusiastic delusions. Others, running into the opposite extreme, with equal confidence assert that it is possessed by every genuine believer in Christ; that it is essential to the very nature of faith in him; and that all who are destitute of it ought to regard themselves in a state of condemnation.

Now, the scripture account of this doctrine lies between these extremes. While, on the one hand, it is not true that assurance of salvation is essential to the existence of faith, and possessed by every believer in Christ; on the other hand, it is equally false that it was the exclusive attainment of prophets and apostles. Some in all ages have enjoyed this blessing, and the people of God have still encouragement to seek and to expect its attainment. These points I shall endeavour briefly to illustrate under the following positions;—that assurance of salvation has been attained by many,—that the sacred scriptures exhort us to seek it, and encourage us to expect it,—that they furnish us with numerous marks of Christian character for this purpose,—that the Holy Spirit is said to witness with the hearts of God's children respecting their interest in Christ,—that assurance is not inseparably connected with faith in Christ, and therefore not a common attainment of genuine believers,—that none but saints of eminent holiness can ordinarily reach it,—that after it is ob-

tained, for a season it may be obscured or lost,—and that, as it may be obtained by every believer, so none should rest satisfied without diligently seeking it.

1. Assurance of salvation has been attained by many.—This is a truth which no person can presume to doubt, who admits the testimony of the sacred scriptures. The history of many of the saints whose experience is here recorded, puts the matter beyond all contradiction. Let us look at a few of these examples. The patriarch Job possessed this inestimable attainment. “I know,” says he, “that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another: though my reins be consumed within me.”* The Psalmist David frequently employs the language of assurance in the book of Psalms. With holy ecstasy he exclaims, “Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.”† The weeping prophet Jeremiah, amid all his distresses, could say in the boldness of faith, “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.”‡ The apostle Paul also enjoyed this exalted and animating blessing;—“I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life

* Job xix. 25—27.

† Psalm lxxiii. 24—26.

‡ Lam. iii. 24.

which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” “I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to me at that day.” “I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”* And the beloved disciple, John, frequently speaks with filial confidence of his certain knowledge of his interest in the love of God:—“Beloved, now are we the sons of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before God.” “Hereby we know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us his Spirit.” “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God, that ye may know that ye have eternal life.”†

That these scripture saints did possess assurance of their salvation, is too evident from these passages to admit of doubt. But while this is granted, the opponents of this doctrine object, “that all these were inspired men, persons whose office and qualifi-

* Gal. ii. 20; 2 Tim. i. 12; iv. 6; Rom. viii. 38, 39.

† 1 John iii. 2, 14, 19; iv. 13; v. 13.

cations were extraordinary; and, consequently, that nothing can be legitimately inferred from their case, in proof that this blessing may be attained by Christians in our days.”—It is strange, indeed, that any man, who has examined these examples, should have started this objection. For though we should admit that it appears to have some validity in all the cases specified, except these written by John, yet the language employed by him totally overthrows it. In every one of the above citations, he speaks, not simply in his own name, but in that of other Christians to whom he wrote: “*We* are the sons of God;”—“*we* know,” &c. And, in the last quotation, he plainly and expressly mentions, that he wrote to believers in Christ, for the very purpose that they might know their title to eternal life. But if all genuine believers might know this, during the primitive age of the church, where is the proof that they cannot now reach this attainment? Assurance of salvation was not an extraordinary gift of the Spirit in those early times,—a thing limited to comparatively a few; but a blessing attainable by all the children of God. And if all then might, what is the reason that some now may not, know their calling of God?

Besides, if the testimony of some of the best of men who have lived in later times, be worthy of credit, we cannot doubt that many of them have enjoyed assurance of their salvation. In documents written by their own hand, contained in their memoirs, more than a few of them testify, that they have sometimes been blessed with clear and most consoling evidence of their interest in Christ. So animated have their souls been with the humble, but

unclouded persuasion of this, that, like Paul, they have expressed to God their panting desire to depart and to be with Christ.—Nor has this been the transitory ebullition of the heated imagination of weak-minded fanatics. It has been the deliberate testimony of men distinguished for mental capacity, soundness of intellect, and eminent attainments in science and literature.

2. The sacred scriptures exhort us to seek to know our faith in Christ, and encourage us to expect success in this inquiry.—Addressing the members of the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul thus solemnly charges them, “Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?”* To the brethren of the churches in Galatia he gives a similar injunction;—“If a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.”† And, in his epistle to the Hebrews, he thus expresses himself, “We desire that every one of you do show the same diligence, to the full assurance of hope unto the end.”‡ These passages contain very explicit exhortations and injunctions to professing believers in Christ, diligently to endeavour to know their spiritual state. It is therefore their commanded duty to seek after assurance of their faith in Christ.

To this it is objected, “that we are as plainly commanded to be *perfect* as our Father who is in heaven is perfect, as we are commanded to seek

* 2 Cor. xiii. 5. † Gal. vi. 3, 4. ‡ Heb. vi. 11.

assurance. Perfection, however, we know is not attainable in this life, for John testifies of himself, and all other Christians, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." As, therefore, notwithstanding this duty, no man is perfect; so, notwithstanding the duty of seeking assurance, it may be just as unattainable as perfection."—To this it is sufficient to reply, that while it would be sinful to aim at any thing short of perfect obedience to a perfect rule of duty, no encouragement is held up for us to expect that we can reach it in this world. But it is otherwise with respect to the attainment of assurance. We are obviously taught, in the forecited texts of scripture, to view it as a thing which we may reach.

In the first of these texts, after giving a double charge to the members of the church at Corinth, to examine and prove their spiritual state, the apostle expresses himself in the language of surprise that they should be ignorant of this: "Know ye not your own selves," &c. But how could Paul have been surprised at this, or have put such an urgent question respecting it, had he accounted it a thing not generally attainable by believers? The language which he uses, plainly implies that he regarded it practicable for them to know their state.—In the second of these texts, this is not simply implied, but clearly expressed. He assures the Galatian believers, that if each of them did prove, by self-examination, his own work; then, as the consequence of knowing his faith in Christ, "he should have rejoicing in himself, and not in another." Had it been impossible for them to be assured of their interest in the Re-

deemer, how could they have obtained rejoicing as the result of self-investigation? Some benefit might, indeed, have been derived from it, though they had not reached assurance. But joy and peace in believing can flow from nothing short of the certain expectation of eternal life.—In the last of these texts, the believing Hebrews are plainly encouraged to expect “assurance of hope,” or the fullest satisfaction that their hope of salvation was well founded, and would never leave them to disappointment and shame. It was by the prospect of this attainment, that he stimulated them to diligence in duty.—The obvious inference, therefore, from all these texts is, that genuine believers now, as well as in former times, have encouragement to expect, that, by diligent trial of their character, they may arrive at assurance of their salvation.

3. The word of God furnishes us with numerous marks of Christian character, to assist us in arriving at the knowledge of our state.—This particular has already been considered, chapter first, section third; and chapter third, section third; and to illustrate some of these marks has been the design of the whole of chapter fifth. It is here mentioned, because it furnishes an additional argument respecting the attainableness of assurance of salvation; and because the following particular is founded on the assumption of its truth.—The design of these marks of character is, not simply to point out what the people of God should endeavour to be, but to assist them in knowing what they really are, in the estimation of the heart-searching Jehovah. It is by them that the Spirit of God discovers to believers their real condition.

4. The Holy Spirit is said to witness with the hearts of God's children, respecting their interest in Christ.—This is expressly specified by the apostle Paul: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirits, that we are the children of God."* Words cannot make it plainer, that the Holy Spirit in some way does witness, or co-operate in his testimony, with the inward consciousness of true believers, respecting their regeneration and adoption into God's family of grace. The fact is here clearly affirmed; nor can it be denied on account of the mistaken notions of any respecting its nature.

It is much to be lamented, that some who profess to believe the doctrine of the Holy Spirit's agency in the regeneration and sanctification of the children of God, describe his influences and witnessing in a manner so unscriptural and extravagant, that they greatly injure the cause which they profess to support, and make, "the way of truth to be evil spoken of." Under the combined effects of ignorance, ardent zeal, and a misguided imagination, they speak of dreams and visions,—of violent impulses, and new revelations,—of secret voices, and flashes of celestial light darted into the mind, as if they were the common operations of the Spirit of God, and the real experience of all genuine believers. Thus they dishonour the Holy One of Israel, by ascribing to him the effects of a heated fancy; and they deceive themselves, by substituting in place of his agency, their own ardent feelings and enthusiastic agitations. Disclaiming all pretensions to such wild delusions, I shall endeavour to give, what I account, a scriptural and rational statement, concerning the

* Rom. viii. 16.

manner of the Spirit's witnessing with the hearts of believers, respecting their spiritual condition.

This work the Holy Ghost accomplishes by enabling believers, on the one hand, to form just conceptions of those delineations of Christian character contained in the word of God; and, on the other, by shining on his own regenerating work in them, so as to make them perceive its exact agreement with the written word.—The sacred scriptures are the work of the Holy Spirit. He dictated them to those who penned them, and infallibly guided them in thus communicating his will to his church. “The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”* The delineations of godly character, therefore, contained in this holy volume, are strictly speaking the *written witness* of the Spirit. In leading them to the true and spiritual import of this witness, he himself is their Teacher; for without his illumination they could not understand it aright. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” But he opens their understandings to know divine truth, to see its divine excellence, and to feel its divine power. They “have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things,” with spiritual discernment.—In addition to this assistance of the Spirit, qualifying them to form just conceptions of those delineations of Christian character contained in the written word; he shines on his own renovating work in them, so that they perceive an exact agreement between the two. Born of the Spirit of

* 2 Pet. i. 21.

God, renewed in the spirit of their minds, and having put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness; they are enabled to see, in their heart and practice, the stamp of God's children. So distinct and unequivocal does it appear, at least in some features, that they cannot doubt its reality. Filled, therefore, with holy assurance, they rejoice with a joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Here let it be distinctly understood, and carefully remembered, that wherever this witness of the Holy Spirit is enjoyed, it may be known and distinguished from false impressions by its immediate effects. In all cases, instead of inflating the mind with pride, it fills it with deep humility and self-abasement. Never do his people entertain more lowly views of themselves, than when thus highly favoured of God. They account themselves less than the least of all saints, and the chief of sinners. Instead of filling them with self-confidence and security; it excites them to distrust of themselves, to reliance on Christ, and to watchful circumspection against the very appearance of evil. And, instead of encouraging sloth, it animates them to every good word and work. Constrained by the love of Christ, they regard themselves bound, diligently and unweariedly, to glorify him with their bodies and spirits which are his.

5. Assurance of salvation is not inseparably connected with faith in Christ, and therefore not a common attainment of genuine believers.—In direct opposition to this, some maintain that assurance is essential to the nature of faith, and possessed by every genuine believer; and that all who are destitute of it, are in a state of unbelief and condemnation. The amount of their reasoning in support of this

point, is simply this;—"The gospel publishes, that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.' Now, say they, we are conscious that we do believe that Christ is the only Saviour of sinners; and therefore we are assured that we shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life. We are at no loss to know when we believe or disbelieve the testimony of men. If we did not believe the testimony of God, in the gospel, concerning Christ, we could not but be conscious of our unbelief. But if we do believe it, we must be conscious of this also; for no one can believe any thing, without knowing that he does so. Wherefore, since we do believe in Christ, we are sure that we shall be saved."

This statement contains a mixture of truth and of error. It is true, that every one who is certain that he does unfeignedly believe in Christ for pardon and eternal life, is assured of salvation. But it is not true that every one who does believe in Christ, is certain of the reality of his faith. On the contrary, many, very many genuine, though weak believers, do not possess this certainty. While, on the one hand, they dare not say they are conscious that they *disbelieve* God's testimony, respecting their condition as helpless sinners, and Christ's ability and willingness to save to the uttermost, all who come to God by him; on the other hand, they cannot confidently affirm that they do *assuredly believe* this with all their heart. Though they can appeal to God that they sincerely wish to believe in Christ, and to make

his blood the only resting place of their soul; yet the matter is of such transcendent importance, and their hearts are so very deceitful, that they dread lest their faith should not be unfeigned. Especially when they look at their tempers and practice, and find in them so much which is unlike the fruits of faith, they experience sad misgivings, and are distressed with doubts and fears.

All who have any thing like an extensive acquaintance with the professing and approved followers of Christ,—those who have long proved the genuineness of their faith, by the consistency of a holy life,—must know that cases of this nature are far from being uncommon. And yet, after all the expressions of disquietude and fearfulness uttered by such persons, we durst not presume to question that they may be true believers. As Christ frequently addressed his disciples, “O ye of little faith!” without even insinuating that their doubts and fears were an evidence of their want of faith; so ought we not even to suspect the Christian piety of such persons, when their religious profession is supported by a corresponding practice.

They who affirm that assurance of salvation is inseparably connected with faith in Christ, and the common attainment of every believer, are unavoidably led into several inconsistencies and absurdities. Were this the case, believers could not consistently be exhorted to seek assurance. Possessed of it already, as they are supposed to be, all such injunctions would be totally irrelevant and useless. Yet Paul charges the Hebrew believers, “that every one of them show the same diligence, to the full assurance

of hope unto the end.”* Peter commands those who had obtained like precious faith with himself, to “give all diligence to make their calling and election sure.”† And John, expressly for the purpose of their obtaining assurance, thus affectionately expostulates with the sons of God, “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed, and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.”‡

Were this the case, the assurance of believers, and consequently their joy and peace, would be uninterrupted. As they never can lose their faith, so, according to this doctrine, they could not lose their assurance. But so far from this, we find the most eminent saints bitterly complaining that God had hid his face from them. Job, in anguish of spirit, exclaims, “O that I knew where I might find him! Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him.”§ David, in deep distress of soul, mournfully cries out, “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me: restore to me the joy of thy salvation.”|| And Asaph, in bitter despondency, inquires, like one utterly forsaken, “Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?”¶

Were this the case, no provision would be made for the comfort of doubting and desponding believers.

* Heb. vi. 11. † 2 Pet. i. 10. ‡ 1 John iii. 18, 19. § Job xxiii. 3, 8.
 || Psalm li. 11, 12. ¶ Psalm lxxvii. 7, 8, 9.

They would be treated as unbelievers, and called to flee from condemnation; and not tenderly consoled as sons of God. But, instead of this, the sacred volume is fraught with animating declarations and promises to such distressed souls. When Zion said, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me," behold what rich comfort is administered! "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; and thy walls are continually before me."* With what heart-cheering strains does our blessed Redeemer himself address such disconsolate believers! "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because he hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek! he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, —to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called Trees of Righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified."†

Were this the case, saving faith could not admit of degrees. If assurance be inseparably connected with faith, then every believer alike possesses this attainment. Assurance, strictly and absolutely considered, cannot be greater in some and less in others. If a man be assured of his salvation, what higher belief respecting it can he reach? But if he have less than this, he does not possess assurance at all. Now what is this, but to admit that the faith of every believer is perfect,—that the youngest believer, brought

* Isa. xlix. 14—16.

† Isa. lxi. 1—3.

into the family of grace to-day, is as high in his evidences and prospects for eternity, as the oldest disciple who has longest served Christ, and made the greatest advances in sanctification? In direct opposition to all this, we read of different degrees in faith,—of some “weak in faith,”—of others “strong in faith,”—and of “the faith of some growing exceedingly.”* We read of babes in the family of grace,—of young men,—and of fathers.† And we are explicitly told, “that grace is given to every one of us, according to the measure of the gift of Christ,—that we may grow up into him in all things, who is the head, even Christ.”‡

These considerations incontrovertibly prove, that assurance of salvation is not inseparably united with faith. So far from being impossible that the latter should exist without the former, it is thus abundantly obvious, that many of those who truly believe in Christ may not have attained assurance. No one, therefore, simply on account of his want of this blessing, ought to be regarded, either by others, or by himself, still under the unbroken darkness of unbelief, and the thralldom of iniquity.

6. None but saints of eminent holiness can ordinarily reach assurance.§—I am far from denying that any convert, when he first believes in Christ, can immediately be assured of his salvation, and experience joy and peace in believing. On the contrary, it is certain, from the testimony of scripture, that some have forthwith been made to go on their way rejoicing. Such is the account which is given concerning the Ethiopian eunuch,—the keeper of the prison at

* Rom. xiv. 1 : iv. 20. 2 Thes. i. 3. † 1 John ii. 12, 13. ‡ Eph. iv. 7, 15.

§ The hindrances of assurance are considered in Chap. II.

Philippi,—and those who were added to the church on the memorable day of Pentecost. Nor can I doubt that some in every subsequent age may have been thus highly favoured.

What I here maintain is, that though some converts, at the very commencement of the divine life in their soul, *may* be assured that they shall not perish, but have everlasting life; yet it by no means follows, that all of them *must* have the same experience. So far from this, we have ample ground to conclude, that this is the attainment of comparatively few believers at all. And among those who do reach assurance, it is not commonly obtained at the beginning of their Christian course, when they are only babes in grace; but at a later period, when their gracious principles are matured, and their fruits of righteousness are increased and multiplied. Till this be the case, the features of the Christian character are not sufficiently prominent to be easily marked. They cannot be certain of the genuineness of their faith, till they know, and be able to distinguish, the genuineness of its fruits, by comparing them with the written and unerring standard of God's word. Till they are certain that it works by love to Christ, his word, and his people,—purifies the heart from the love of all that is sinful,—and overcomes the forbidden allurements and temptations of the world; they dare not be assured that it is the faith of God's elect.

I am aware that some bitterly decry all attempts to ascertain the reality of faith by its fruits, as if they proceeded from a legal and self-righteous spirit; and had a direct tendency to lead men to rely on their own works, rather than the blood of Christ. The charge, however, is altogether futile. That faith which is

without works, we are assured by an apostle, "is dead, being alone." And, not deeming it enough to state this truth even twice in one chapter, a third time he repeats it, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."* In the great day of judgment, we are told, men shall be tried, and rewarded or punished, not according to their faith, but according to their works. And the authoritative rule, given by our Lord is, "the tree is known by his fruit."† Works of righteousness, then, or the fruits of faith, are the surest test by which it can be known whether it is living or dead. But till these fruits have been produced, believers cannot judge themselves by them. Some time, however, must elapse between the sowing of the seed, and the appearance of the fruit. Many months, or even years, may pass by, before it be sufficiently ripened to enable them to see in it, the sure evidences of their faith in Christ.

7. After assurance has been obtained, for a season it may be obscured or lost.—It has already been noticed that this could not be the experience of any, were assurance inseparably connected with faith. As all believers are kept by the power of God in the possession of faith, they would be kept equally, according to this doctrine, in the possession of assurance. So far, however, from this being the case, we find the reverse proved by examples from the holy Scriptures. If we inquire into the experience of the same persons, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, who certainly did enjoy assurance, we shall meet with undeniable evidence, that several of them were for a time bereft of this attainment. The holy

* James ii. 17, 20, 26.

† Matt. xiii. 33.

patriarch Job thus affectingly bemoans his desertion,—“ Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; when his candle shined upon my head, and when by his light I walked through darkness; as in the days of my youth, when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle; when the Almighty was yet with me!”* The Psalmist David too thus utters his complaint,—“ My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?” “ Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation!”† And the prophet Jeremiah, amid painful disappointment, bitterly exclaims, “ Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?”‡

Now, if these eminently gifted servants of God, so far from uninterruptedly enjoying the light of his countenance and assurance of his love, were thus subjected to deep distress of soul; what believer, in our days, will presume to say that he is secure against any such bereavements? No one can thus boastingly talk of his assurance, who knows his own weakness, and the danger to which he is continually exposed, by the temptations and enemies with which he is surrounded. Should the most distinguished saint on earth offend his heavenly Father, by neglecting important duties, or by committing presumptuous sins; his assurance for a season shall be darkened. God will hide from him the wonted tokens of his love, till he has chastised him for his

* Job xxix. 2—5.

† Psal. xxii. 1, 2; xxvii. 9.

‡ Jer. xv. 18.

transgression, brought him to deep humility and contrition of heart, and aroused him to suitable watchfulness and dependence. And then, but not till then, will he restore to him the joys of his salvation. Then, but not till then, will he address his offending child, “For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.”*

8. Assurance may be obtained by every believer, and none should rest satisfied without diligently seeking it.—There is much reason to fear, that the want of assurance gives many professing Christians little uneasiness. When they are told that it is not essential to the existence of faith, and that many genuine saints do not enjoy this blessing, they console themselves with this belief. Since their state may be safe without assurance, they are quite unconcerned about its attainment.

This is a very unpromising feature of character. They who are partakers of a divine nature, are filled with a holy jealousy of themselves. They esteem their everlasting salvation a matter of too great magnitude, to be able to sit at their ease, while they are uncertain respecting it. Were they to account it a thing of little moment, they might treat it with coldness and indifference. But viewing it, as they do, as the one thing needful,—the principal business of life—that which involves their all for eternity,—they cannot fail to be solicitous to make it sure. Those, therefore, who seldom or never inquire whether they are, or are not, genuine believers in

* Isa. liv. 7.

Christ; and who are giving no diligence to make their calling and election sure; have much ground to fear that they are still strangers to the spirit and power of godliness.

“ Assurance is a blessing equally open to all believers. It is not the exclusive privilege of great services or sufferings; it is not confined to ministers, martyrs, or apostles; but is a prize set before all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, being no other than the growth and establishment of that faith which they have already received. The reasons why all who believe are not happy in this assurance of hope, are to be sought for, not in the will of God, who has made abundant provision for our comfort, but in the perverseness, ignorance, and misapprehensions of our own hearts, and from inattention to his revealed word. We are not straitened in him, but in ourselves.”* Were believers persuaded of this truth, would it not powerfully stimulate and encourage them in aspiring after this blessing? And were they diligently and perseveringly to employ the means which God has provided for promoting their growth in grace,† few of them would long have cause to bewail their want of assurance. Instead of being distressed with misgiving apprehensions, and spending so much of their time in unavailing complaints, they would live up to their exalted privileges and glorious prospects, and experience of verity, that “wisdom’s ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are paths of peace.”

Animated by these considerations, be encouraged, my reader, though you have not yet reached it, to press onward to the attainment of this high and

* Newton's Works, vol. iv. Ser. 20.

† See chap. xi.

blissful privilege. It is set before you. It is placed within your reach. It is necessary to your peace and comfort. It is productive of joy unspeakable and full of glory. It will fit you, in a high degree, to glorify your heavenly Father,—to live above the allurements and frowns of this world,—to cheer the hearts and to strengthen the hands of your Christian brethren,—to allure others to the ways of holiness,—and to enjoy much of heaven while on earth. It will sweeten to you every comfort, by enabling you to trace them all to your Father's care and love. It will greatly alleviate your trials and afflictions, by leading you to view them as the kind chastisements of a Father, and the tokens of your adoption. It will animate you with activity and zeal in the performance of every duty, and dispose you cheerfully to make every required sacrifice. It will increase your relish for his holy word, and make you feel it sweeter to your taste than honey from the honeycomb. How sweet will its promises then be to your soul, assuring you that all things are yours, and that God will withhold from you nothing which he knows to be conducive to your good! What pleasure will you experience in his ordinances, with joy drawing water from these wells of salvation! What holy boldness and filial confidence will you experience in prayer, when you unbosom your heart to your God and Saviour, cast upon him your cares, and make known to him your wants and sorrows! How will it increase your delight in the exercise of praise, as the cheering foretaste of the song of heaven! How will it fortify you against the fears of death, and enable you to meet it, saying, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou

art with me: thy rod and thy staff they comfort me!" How will it inspire you with ardent desires after full fruition of that bliss which awaits you in heaven; and cause you daily to look and long for the glorious period, when you shall join all who have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb! These are blessings worthy of your highest ambition, and most laborious pursuit.

In conclusion, if you already possess, or think you possess, assurance of salvation, I would say to you, look well to the ground on which it is built, and the evidence by which it is proved. In these respects you cannot be too cautious, lest, like too many confident and boasting pretenders, you should be found at last self-deceivers. See to it that your faith in Christ lead you to an unreserved reliance on his all-perfect righteousness. Let your motto be, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us."* And while utterly denied to any dependence on your good works; at the same time, look to it that they be not wanting. As well may you pronounce a barren tree fruitful, as conclude on any account that you are a believer in Christ, if you do not run in the way of his commandments. You have not yet believed the gospel, if you are not taught by it, practically to "deny all ungodliness and worldly lust, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world."

If you have cause to believe that your assurance of salvation is thus founded, and is productive of these results, O study to give glory to him who has so highly distinguished you by his sovereign, rich, and efficacious grace! Let your whole life be conse-

* Titus iii. 5.

crated to his praise, who has called you from darkness into his marvellous light. Never, never can you do enough to testify a becoming sense of the immeasurably vast obligations under which he has laid you. "You are not your own; you are bought with a price; wherefore glorify God with your body and spirit which are his." And as you value your present attainment, guard against losing it by tampering with temptation, trifling with duty, or willingly giving place, even in your thoughts, to the imaginations and emotions of sin. "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God by whom you are sealed to the day of redemption." With humble reliance on his promised assistance, and habitual concern for his honour, be faithful in his service to the death, and he will give you the crown of life.

But though you should not yet have reached this attainment, be not discouraged, if you can say that you cordially desire to cleave to Christ. Many of the true and humble followers of the Lamb dare not affirm that they are assured of their salvation. They feel such a mixture of unbelief opposing their faith, that they are doubtful which has the ascendancy. In this respect they resemble that man, of whom we read in the gospel history, who came to Christ supplicating relief to his afflicted son: "Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."* But distressed as that man was with his unbelief, and readily as he confessed it, our Lord approved of him as a true, though a weak and doubting believer; and in proof of this,

* Mark ix. 23, 24.

cured his child.—Whatever fears may occasionally disturb your mind, encouraged by this example, cast not away your humble, but unfeigned trust in Christ. If you can appeal to him that you are grieved that you love him so little, and that it is your desire to love him more,—that on his blood alone you daily endeavour to rest your hope, and that you would not relinquish your trust in him for the wealth of a world; yours is a promising case. Though clouds may envelop your path throughout your pilgrimage; yet at length your darkness shall be turned into light, and your doubts exchanged for unmingled and uninterrupted assurance. “Weeping may endure for a night; but joy cometh in the morning.” “Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.”*

* Psalm xxx. 5: xcvii. 11.

CHAPTER VIII.

NATURE AND PROPERTIES OF GROWTH IN GRACE.

Introductory observations.—1. Growth in grace obviously implies its real existence in the soul.—2. The divine seed from which it springs, is usually at first small and weak.—3. The Holy Spirit is the great efficient cause of growth in grace.—4. It is usually effected by the diligent use of means.—5. The Christian does not always grow in grace.—6. When grace grows, its effects are always visible.—7. Growth in grace is generally imperceptible to the Christian himself.—8. It is usually most discernible in the early stages of the Christian life.—9. The Christian may grow in some graces, and but little in others.—10. Progress in growth in grace is exceeding various, but is usually proportioned to Christian diligence.—11. Growth in grace is a blessing which is promised, and after which every Christian is both commanded and inclined to aspire.

THE highest attainments to which the children of God can reach, while sojourners on earth, come far short of that perfection required by the Divine law, and which they are encouraged to expect. Sensible of this, the most eminent among them have felt, confessed, and bewailed their deficiencies; and panted and laboured after nearer conformity to the will and image of God. Even they who have obtained assurance of their salvation, and shared most abundantly of the consolations of Christ, have always thirsted most after a growing meetness for the pure delights of heaven.—Such was the case with the apostle Paul. Notwithstanding he enjoyed unshaken confidence of his interest in the Saviour's love, and had made great and rapid advances in sanctification; he saw and acknowledged his imperfections, and

aspired after a higher degree of holiness:—"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."* In accordance with these sentiments, he thus expresses himself to the members of the church at Ephesus:—"When Christ ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ;—and speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, who is the head, even Christ."† The apostle Peter, also, after many salutary exhortations to the persecuted saints to whom he wrote, thus closes his epistle:—"Ye, therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness: but grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."‡

Growth in grace, therefore, or progressive advancement in holiness, is what every Christian needs, and is bound in duty, as well as by interest, to

* Philip. iii. 12—14.

† Ephes. iv. 8—15.

‡ 2 Peter iii. 17, 18.

endeavour to obtain. Consequently, it must be of vast importance, that every one of them should possess scriptural and correct views of the manner in which this is to be effected, and be put on his guard against the most common and dangerous obstructions to its attainment. To aid you in this, I shall endeavour to set before you, the nature and properties of growth in grace,—its evidences,—its preventives,—the means by which it may be promoted,—and its important advantages.—To the first of these topics I shall confine myself in the sequel of this chapter.

1. Growth in grace obviously implies, its real existence in the soul.—This is a remark so self-evident, that to some it may appear altogether superfluous. Every one knows, that seed cannot grow where it has not been sown, nor a tree where it has no root. Living seed must be put into the soil, ere its verdure and fruit can appear. A living plant must first be in that portion of ground where we expect it to grow, otherwise our labour in cultivating and watering that spot of earth, must be useless.—Equally necessary is it, that the living and incorruptible seed of grace be first implanted in the soul, before growth in grace can be rationally expected.

This observation, unnecessary and trifling as some may regard it, is of primary importance. Obvious though it be, it is nevertheless too commonly overlooked. There is, alas ! too much need to press it on the attention of multitudes who have a Christian profession. How many of this stamp who are destitute of the saving grace of God, and who might know this if they would take the pains to inquire, are disposed to view it as a matter not to be doubted,

that they already are Christians. They have assumed the name of disciples of Christ,—they are treated as such by their fellow-men,—and they manifest a decent regard to the public institutions of religion. Though unrenewed in the spirit of their mind, they carefully avoid a particular scrutiny of their state; and willingly flatter themselves that they already are partakers of the grace of God. When they pray, it is for the blessings and comforts of God's children, rather than for the implantation of that grace, essential to their being put among his children. In a word, without seeing their need of a new heart, they expect to grow up, in their present state, in meetness for heaven. Thus, from ignorance of their true character, they mistake what should be their first and their chief aim. Instead of seeking grace, they dream only of glory. They please themselves with the hopes of a heavenly harvest, while yet the seed of it is not sown.

This consideration strongly enforces the necessity of careful and diligent self-examination. Every man who desires to grow in grace,—to be adorned with every Christian temper and practice, and to acquire a meetness to be made a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light, must seek to know his calling of God. Till this be ascertained, even the genuine Christian cannot advance with comfort in the way of holiness. For ought he knows to the contrary, he may be seeking to cherish what has no existence in his soul; and even while he is making some progress in conformity to the image of Christ, he must be deprived of the peace and joy which would result from it, were he clearly acquainted with his spiritual state.

2. The Divine seed from which growth in grace

springs, is usually at first small and weak.—Were it consistent with the will of God, we cannot doubt that he could, in the moment of regeneration, at once begin and complete the good work in the soul of his people. Every grace, when implanted, might be in a state of perfection. As, in the beginning of the material creation, the body and mind of Adam were formed in a state of maturity; so it might have been in the spiritual creation. And something like this must take place in the case of all, who, like the thief on the cross, are made partakers of grace, only at the concluding hour of life.—But, for purposes infinitely wise, God has, in all ordinary cases, ordered it otherwise. In the economy of grace he usually works, as he now always does in the system of nature. From small beginnings we behold great results. The acorn, small though it be when cast into the ground, produces the majestic and wide spreading oak. The mightiest hero or potentate on earth, was once a little helpless infant. The man who is a father in Christ, matured in knowledge, holiness, and Christian experience, was once a babe in grace who required to be fed with milk, and not with strong meat.

This truth is evidently recognised by our blessed Redeemer: “And he said, Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: but when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.”* In

these words Christ taught, not only the certain progress of his church in the world, which, from a small beginning, was to extend till it filled the earth; but also the advancement of his kingdom in the soul of man. The incorruptible seed, when sown in the heart by the Holy Spirit, is represented as a grain of mustard seed, to point out how little and weak it then is. He who knew what is in man, thus described it; and every one acquainted with the case, must see the fitness of his description. How weak at first is the Christian's spiritual apprehension of Divine things? He sees them often as through a mist, dimly and imperfectly. How weak is his faith, and how ready to stagger at difficulties? How weak is his hope, and how prone to sink under delays? How weak is his humility, and how frequently is it overcome by the workings of pride? In a word, every gracious principle is in its infantile state, and, to a great degree, unfit for hard work, or dangerous warfare.

3. The Holy Spirit is the great efficient cause of growth in grace.—This is a truth prominently set forth in the word of God. To this Almighty agent the whole work of grace in the soul of man is ascribed, from its commencement in the day of regeneration, to its completion in glory. It is He who quickens the soul dead in trespasses and sins, and makes it alive to God and to holiness. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”* All who are constituted children of God, are “born of water, and of the Spirit.†” It is He who reno-

* Tit. iii. 5.

† John iii. 5.

vates all the powers and faculties of their soul, implants in it gracious principles, and makes them productive of the peaceable fruits of righteousness. "They walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit:—the Spirit of God dwells in them:—through the Spirit they mortify the deeds of the body:—they are led by the Spirit of God:—the Spirit helpeth their infirmities:—and the fruit of the Spirit, which they bring forth, is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."*

The manner of the Spirit's operation in the soul of man, either in the first implantation of the seeds of grace, or in his subsequent maturing of them till they produce these excellent fruits, we cannot comprehend. It is a spiritual and invisible process, entirely concealed from outward observation, and which it is impossible, even for those in whom he dwells and operates, to comprehend and explain. Our blessed Lord plainly stated this truth to Nicodemus, when he taught him the necessity of regeneration:—"Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." But though the mode of his working be hid from our view, and beyond our comprehension; the certainty of it is evident from its supernatural effects. We know not the manner in which common fruit is produced on the trees of a garden. But when we see it, we cannot doubt that these trees are possessed of vegetable life and prolific qualities. A dead or a

* Rom. viii. 1, 4, 9, 13, 14, 26; Gal. v. 22, 23.

barren tree, we are certain, cannot bring forth fruit. —In like manner, we infer the existence and operations of a living and supernatural principle, in the production of supernatural fruit. And this unseen principle is the agency of the Spirit of God. The fruits which it produces are visible, and such as may be examined and proved by all men. They are fruits, not found in the wilderness of nature, but in the garden of grace,—fruits which grow only on the trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, in which he is glorified.

4. Growth in grace is usually effected by the diligent use of means.—Ample security is given to all the children of God that they shall grow in grace. This formed a part of Jehovah's design in the everlasting counsels of peace. The apostle Paul frequently mentions this in his epistles to the churches. To the saints at Ephesus he says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly things in Christ; according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."* And to the saints at Thessalonica he thus writes, "We are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren, beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth."† This was part of the Saviour's design in undertaking and accomplishing our redemption. "Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous

* Ephes. i. 3, 4.

† 2 Thes. ii. 13.

of good works.”* And this, as we already have seen, is the grand design of the Holy Spirit’s operations, in the regeneration and progressive sanctification of believers.

But unquestionable though the security be which God has given, that grace shall grow in all who are partakers of it; this does not preclude their diligence in the use of appointed means.† So far from this, they have no encouragement to expect the former, without a proper attention to the latter. In very peculiar cases, where there is no access to the means of grace, or when persons are incapacitated to employ them; the Spirit of God may perfect his work in the soul, without their use. But in all ordinary cases, he works through the instrumentality of means.—Thus it is in the economy of nature. The boundary of human life is fixed immutably in the decrees of God, so that no individual can either come short of it, or surpass it, even a single moment. But no man, on this account, is warranted to neglect the means of sustaining and preserving his life. None but a madman would, on this account, despise the use of food, and medicine, and avoidance of danger.—Precisely similar is the case in the economy of grace. God has appointed means to be used for promoting our advancement in holiness: and he has strictly charged us to be attentive and diligent in improving them. How urgently does the apostle Peter press this duty on those who “had obtained like precious faith” with himself! “And besides this, giving all diligence, add to you faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, pa-

* Tit. ii. 14. † These means are particularly considered in Chap. XI.

tience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they shall make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.”*

5. The Christian does not always grow in grace.— It is readily admitted that grace, in its own nature, is an incorruptible seed,—a seed which never can utterly die. Wherever it is planted, under the fostering care of the great Husbandman, it shall not only be preserved from destruction, but shall certainly spring up, producing fruit to everlasting life. “The Lord will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance.” “He who begins the good work in them, will assuredly perform it, till the day of Jesus Christ.”† But while the vital principle of grace always lives, it is not always lively and operative. So far from this, Scripture and experience concur in proving that the people of God do not always advance in holiness. There are seasons in which they appear, not simply to be stationary, but to go backwards. Instead of growing, they resemble plants amid the nipping frosts of winter, which seem to decline. We read of the temporary backslidings of genuine saints, during which they resembled trees, stripped not only of their fruit and foliage, but dried up and dead from

* 2 Pet. i. 5—10.

† Psalm xciv. 14; Philip. i. 6.

the root. So far from exemplifying the spirit and practice characteristic of the sons of God, their conduct for a time was more like that of the children of the wicked one.—Thus it was in an eminent degree with David, when he added bloodshed to adultery, and, for several successive months, seemed insensible and unconcerned under his complicated guilt. And thus it but too frequently happens with God's children, when they are overcome by powerful temptations, and hurried back into the indulgence of some easily besetting sin.

Seasons of this kind, however, are not to be accounted the consequences, only of relapses into former sins, or of the commission of great and aggravated iniquities. In many instances they creep insensibly upon them, when they can be traced to no such obvious causes. While they are engaged in prosecuting their lawful employment, and become anxious to amass wealth, and to rise to independence ; the cares and the love of the world, in many instances, produce this sad and deadening effect. By imperceptible encroachments they gain, for a time, the ascendancy in their heart, and unfit them for a due attention to their spiritual interest. When this is the case, their withering influence soon appears. Their soul is subjected to a spiritual decline.*

6. When grace grows, its effects are always visible.—Grace, like its divine author, in its own nature is invisible. But its fruits or effects cannot be hid. They are not wholly of an internal nature, and known only to those in whom they exist. True it is, that they always begin in the heart, and influ-

* For other causes which prevent growth in grace, see Chap. X.

ence its views, affections, and general experience; and that much of its outward effects consists in secret acts of devotion, and other religious exercises, which meet not the observation of the Christian's most intimate acquaintances. But it is equally true, that the external fruits of growth in grace are not all of a secret kind. Many of them may be readily perceived by those around, and are intended by God for their benefit. On this very account Christ thus solemnly charges his disciples: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."* And, to the same purpose, Peter earnestly beseeches the dispersed saints to whom he addressed his epistle, to have their conversation honest among the Gentiles, "that," says he, "whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation."†

The effects of growth in grace are visible, in the Christian's *conversation*.—To him it may be said in the words of the damsel to Peter, when she affirmed that he was a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, "Thou art one of them, for thy speech bewrayeth thee." From the abundance of his heart his mouth will speak. His language will be serious and savoury, spiritual and heavenly, tending to godly edifying, and ministering instruction to the hearers. It will be seasoned with grace, and will breathe affection to Christ, to his cause, and to his people. It will be the language of Canaan. They are visible in his *company*. Like the holy Psalmist, he will say by his practice, as well as with his lips,—“ I

* Matt. v. 16. † 1 Peter ii. 12.

am companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy commandments."* When it is in his power, he will shun the company of ungodly men, and associate with them who manifest a decided concern for the honour of Christ, and their own spiritual interests.—They are visible in his conscientious *abstinence from sinful indulgences*. Fashionable and common as any practice may be, which is prohibited by the authority of God, or which has an obvious tendency to ensnare the soul; he will flee from its enticements. Though he should be pointed at with the finger of scorn, for his singularity, and stigmatized for illiberality; he will prefer a clear conscience, and the approbation of God, to the smiles and caresses of the world. In fine, the effects of growth in grace are visible, in the Christian's *active endeavours* to promote the honour of God, and the good of men. By a strict attention to all the institutions of religion, in the family as well as in public, he will study to glorify God with his body and spirit. And by forming and countenancing schemes for meliorating the condition of society, and extending the blessings of the gospel to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death; he will testify good will to the human race.

7. Growth in grace is generally imperceptible to the Christian himself.—Sometimes it is otherwise. The progress made in the divine life is so rapid, that it cannot be hid, either from the Christian himself, or from his intimate friends. But more commonly it is so slow and gradual that its advancement cannot be perceived, from what takes place in

the course of a few days, or weeks, or even months. Its growth is not instantaneous, or, like Jonah's gourd, the hasty production of a single night. Rather it resembles the slow and imperceptible increase of the hardy oak, which from a slender plant shoots up and strengthens year after year, till it becomes a broad-spreading, deep-rooted, lofty, and durable tree. Or, it may be compared to the growth of the human body, which insensibly advances from infancy to childhood, from childhood to youth, and from youth to matured manhood. In allusion to this, we read of some who are *babes* in grace, who need to be fed with milk, and not with strong meat; of others who are *young men*, strong and active in the Christian life; and of others who are *fathers* in Christ, matured in knowledge, experience, and gracious attainments. In all these the progress towards maturity is imperceptible. Though the oak grows in summer every day, we cannot discern its increase in any short period. Though the child, while in health, is daily advancing to manhood, we cannot observe the progress in a little time. It is only by comparing the present appearance, in either case, with what the former was some considerable time ago, that we are able distinctly to mark the difference. Our blessed Redeemer beautifully illustrates this in one of his parables: "And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear."* After the seed

* Mark iv. 26—28.

is sown, the husbandman, attentive though he be, cannot see its increase, except by waiting patiently, and comparing its present with its former appearance. Precisely in the same way is the Christian to ascertain his growth in grace. Comparing what he now is, with what he was during past months and years, he may easily know his progress in the divine life.

8. Growth in grace is usually most discernible in the early stages of the Christian life.—Particularly this is the case with persons who have arrived to years of maturity, before they are brought under the saving operations of the Holy Spirit. The transition which they experience in coming from darkness into God's marvellous light, is often accompanied with much sensible joy, and the change effected in their views and practice is often striking: especially it is so when their previous conduct has been marked with gross blemishes, and they have been long kept under painful convictions, and the awful terrors of the condemnatory sentence of Jehovah's law. Their deliverance is frequently attended with more lively and sensible transport of soul, than perhaps they ever afterwards experience in any stage of their pilgrimage; and their progress in the way of holiness, into which they have just entered, cannot pass unnoticed. The Ethiopian eunuch, immediately after his conversion, went on his way rejoicing. And concerning the first converts at Thessalonica, Paul thus testifies, "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with

joy of the Holy Ghost.”* Animated with gratitude for the marvellous grace which has snatched them from destruction, they are commonly lively, vigorous, active, and zealous in the work of the Lord. They would desire, if possible, to be employed in nothing else but religious duties; and sometimes, that they may have more leisure for them, are prone for a season to neglect their lawful worldly concerns. Indeed, so rapid does their progress in the way to heaven appear, that it might be thought they would soon arrive to Christian perfection.

But after they have advanced farther in the Christian life, and have felt its difficulties, and experienced their own weakness, their first ardour begins to abate, and their exalted joy is considerably diminished. In such circumstances, comparing their present experience with that of their early days, they often are much cast down, and judge unfavourably respecting their state. They conclude that, so far from growing in grace, they are become in a great measure stationary, if they be not actually going backwards. Should they, however, have no other reason for this conclusion except the want of that early liveliness and comfort, it is no certain evidence that they are in a declining condition. On the contrary, their graces may be maturing apace; and they may be advancing surely, though with less perceptible speed, to the stature of perfect men in Christ.

9. The Christian may grow in some graces, and but little in others.—The Christian graces, or fruits of the Spirit, are inseparable. Where any one of them certainly exists, the rest cannot be totally

* 2 Thess. i. 5, 6.

wanting. In no child of God, however, do they exist all in an equal degree of strength and maturity. Some of them who are eminently distinguished for one gracious attainment, are to a considerable degree defective in another. He who excels in humility, may be deficient in fortitude; and he who is eminent in zeal, may be wanting in patience.— Besides, the circumstances in which God's children are placed, and the dispensations of Providence with which they are visited, are obviously calculated to exercise and improve some of their graces more than others. Great and long continued worldly prosperity is usually very unfavourable to growth in any grace. Adversity, and spiritual tribulations of various kinds, on the contrary, are commonly employed by God to promote his people's advancement in humility, patience, heavenly mindedness, and meetness for heaven.

Taking all these considerations into account, it were vain for any saint to expect to find in himself the evidences of his growing equally in every grace. With respect to some of them, he may be incapable of discerning them at all, from their not being particularly called into action, in the circumstances in which he is placed; and much less can he perceive tokens of their increase. But if any grace be certainly in a thriving state, and if the general symptoms of advancement in holiness be perceived in our temper and practice, we are as certainly growing Christians, as if we could trace every feature of increasing meetness for the celestial kingdom.

10. Progress in growth in grace is exceedingly various, but is usually proportioned to Christian

diligence.—It is various in different Christians. Some of them make rapid progress compared with others. Even among those who live in the same family, attend the same ministrations of the gospel, and to all appearance are equally favoured with the same advantages for improvement, the difference is often exceedingly great. In the language of our Lord, “some bring forth thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred fold.” Consequently, no one ought to judge of his own growth in grace by that of others. If they far excel him, he may be ready to conclude, contrary to truth, that he has no grace, or at least that he is making no advancement in a life of holiness. Whereas if they be greatly inferior to him, in a proportionable degree he may flatter himself to his spiritual hurt.

Besides, growth in grace is not only various in different Christians, favoured seemingly with the same advantages; but also in the same Christian at different times. They who advance slowly during one season, at another may “revive as the corn, and grow as the vine.” There is no child of God who basks always under a summer’s sun. Every one of them has his winter seasons also,—seasons in which he is cold and benumbed, stripped of his liveliness and activity, and deprived of his wonted strength and comfort. During such seasons, though the life of the divine principle is not extinguished, yet its progress may be arrested. Or if it continue to grow, its progress must be so extremely slow, as to be imperceptible, even by the most careful examination.

Generally, however, the progress of growth in grace is proportioned to Christian diligence. As

God has instituted means for promoting its advancement, so it is only by the conscientious use of these means, that any child of God is warranted to expect this attainment. They who too much neglect them, or employ them with languor and formal indifference, cannot reasonably hope to prosper. But they who are active and earnest in improving them, and that not merely by an occasional and extraordinary effort, but in the general tenor of their conduct, will commonly be found in a thriving state. In this respect it is in sacred things, as in the secular concerns of life: "He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand; but the hand of the diligent maketh rich."* What a powerful incentive is this to diligence in improving the means of grace! God has graciously been pleased to put, in a great measure, our advancement in holiness in our own power. If we truly value it, and sincerely desire it, he has told us that it is to be obtained only by the active and persevering observance of these means; and that both our present and our future reward shall be proportioned to our conscientious exertions. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well-doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."†

11. Growth in grace is a blessing which is promised, and after which every Christian is both commanded and inclined to aspire.—Among many promises to this effect which might be mentioned, I

* Prov. x. 4.

† Gal. vi. 7—9.

shall specify only the few following. Speaking of the godly man, the Psalmist says, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season: his leaf also shall not wither." And in another place, to the same effect he declares, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing." The patriarch Job thus testifies: "The righteous shall hold on his way; and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger." The prophet Hosea, after earnestly exhorting God's backsliding people to repentance, encourages them by the promise of an ample increase in grace; "I will be as the dew unto Israel; and he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine; the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon."*

Encouraged by these precious promises, the obvious duty of every child of God is, in the exercise of prayer for their accomplishment, and in the use of those means which are divinely appointed, daily to endeavour to perfect holiness in the fear of God. Advancement in it is not only attainable, but made sure by the promise of Him who cannot lie. If any of his people for a season come short of it, the fault is their own. In this case, they have failed in their

* Psalm i. 3; xcli. 12—14; Job xvii. 9; Hosea xiv. 5.

attention to duty, otherwise their growth in grace would have been according to God's word.

Besides, growth in grace is not only a blessing promised, but its attainment is made our positive duty. We are expressly commanded to "grow in grace." And to the same purpose are all these passages of holy writ, which inculcate progressive holiness; such as the following:—"Sanctify yourselves, therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the Lord your God:"—"Follow holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:"—"Giving all diligence, add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they shall make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Listening with holy reverence to these divinely authoritative precepts, we ought diligently to pursue this invaluable attainment. Believing that "this is the will of God, even our sanctification;" and that by this we shall promote at once his glory, and our own present and eternal happiness; we must view it as the principal business of life, and direct all our energies to this end.

Nor is it possible that any genuine Christian can be habitually unconcerned about growth in grace, and averse to exert himself for its attainment. Indisposed for duty as the best of them may sometimes be; not a solitary individual in whom the divine seed is implanted, can be always indifferent about its increase. The gracious principles imparted to

* Levit. xx. 7; Heb. xii. 14; 2 Peter i. 5, 6.

them in regeneration, natively and powerfully incline them to aspire after conformity to the lovely image of Christ. They do not coldly calculate with how little grace it is possible for them to obtain admission into heaven; and then determine to seek nothing more than this. No! Their ambition is to reach the full amount of the blessing promised, and to grow up in all things to him who is the Head, even Christ. In accordance with Paul's prayer for the saints at Philippi, their earnest desire and endeavour is, "that they may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that they may approve things that are excellent; that they may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God."

CHAPTER IX.

EVIDENCES OF GROWTH IN GRACE.

1. That Christian is growing in grace, who finds himself becoming more dead to the world.—2. More alive to the importance of his salvation, and more sensible of the difficulties with which it is attended.—3. More humble under a sense of his weakness, and more dependent on Christ.—4. More victorious over depraved propensities.—5. More self-denied.—6. More lively in his relish for religious duties, and more spiritual in their observance.—7. Increasing tenderness of conscience, and watchfulness against sin.—8. A lively concern for the prosperity of Christ's church.—9. Meekness under injuries, and a spirit of forgiveness.—10. Receiving with calmness and love the reproofs of good men.—11. A grateful spirit for even common and small mercies.—12. Resignedness to the will of God under trials.—13. A habitual sense of the presence of God, and a desire to act for his glory.

IN attempting to set before you some of the evidences of growth in grace, I might revert to the same particulars already mentioned in Chapter Fifth, as marks of a gracious state ; and point out how increase in these attainments furnishes sure proof of advancement in holiness. But as the field is so very extensive, and some characteristics of God's children are, to a great degree, peculiar to those who are somewhat matured in the divine life, rather than what may be expected in them who have but lately entered on it; I choose to fix on new ground. And here I shall select these features of Christian character which are properly indicative of an advanced state of sanctification.

1. That Christian is growing in grace who finds

himself becoming more dead to the world.—The world is the great idol worshipped by the generality of mankind. Its riches, honours, and pleasures constitute the chief objects of their pursuit,—the sum total of their hopes and desires. To obtain these, they account no labour too great, and no sacrifice too costly :—they boldly hazard their immortal interests.—But the case is different with respect to the children of God. Taught by his Spirit, they have all learned somewhat of the vanity and insignificance of this world ; and, in proportion as they advance in the Divine life, the lesson is more deeply impressed on their mind. Amid the busy scenes of life, the world may occupy too much of their time, and care, and attachment ; but by degrees their hearts are more and more weaned from it, till every one of them can say with Paul, “the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

It is true that the grace of God does not teach men to undervalue and despise any of his gifts. The good things of this life are to be received with thankfulness. Riches, viewed in themselves, are not an evil, but a positive good. They enlarge their possessor's sphere of usefulness. Honours, considered as the badges of office, or the just reward of meritorious services, are not to be condemned. They are commanded by God ; and they operate as a stimulus to virtuous emulation. Pleasures, when innocent, and tasted with moderation and thanksgiving, are not forbidden. They tend to sweeten the cup of life.—But though the people of God are far from contemning any of these earthly blessings, yet they are equally far from over-rating them, and seeking them as their chief good. Their

hearts are supremely set on more durable riches, more ennobling honours, and more blissful pleasures, which neither cloy nor decay. Compared with these, they account the most valuable enjoyments of this world unworthy of a wish.

I am far from asserting that this is always the case with every one who is a partaker of the grace of God. Too often do they feel it otherwise. Conversant as they unavoidably are with sensible objects, and deriving support, as they daily do, from worldly enjoyments, their souls too frequently cleave to the dust. But in proportion as they learn to look, not at the things which are seen and are temporal, but those things unseen by the eye of sense, yet revealed to the eye of faith, and which are eternal; their value for the former is diminished, and their estimate of the latter is increased. As their views of the things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God, become brighter; the things which are on earth will appear dimmer and less attractive. Stripped of their fascinating charms, they will be seen in their own colours, and cease to captivate their soul. Most willingly would they resign them all, that they might depart and be with Christ, which is far better.—When, therefore, the children of God experience this victory over the world,—an increasing persuasion of its emptiness and vanity, and a deadness to its enjoyments,—they certainly are growing in grace.

2. That man is growing in grace who is becoming more alive to the importance of his salvation, and more sensible of the difficulties with which it is attended.—The inestimable value of the soul, and the mighty importance of its salvation, are in some mea-

sure impressed on the minds of all believers, at their entrance on the Christian life. Unless this were the case, they could not be induced to flee to Christ for deliverance, and willingly to forsake all, and to take up their cross and follow him. But deeply as this lesson is then impressed on their heart,—so deeply that it never can be effaced,—they learn it more fully as they advance in the way of holiness. The more they become acquainted with the character and work of Christ, the more they know of the value of his sacrifice, and the ineffable anguish of soul which it cost him to effectuate their redemption; the more are they made alive to the importance of working out their salvation with fear and trembling. Indeed, so increasingly does this become their experience, as they ripen apace for heaven, that all earthly concerns, in comparison with it, are regarded as the paltry toys of children. With an apostle every one of them can join in testifying, “What things were gain to me, those I count loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ, and be found in him.”

Besides, the more they become alive to the importance of their salvation, the more sensible are they of the difficulties with which it is attended. These, at first, in a great measure are hid from their view. Their way appears smooth and easy, and they begin to imagine that it shall always be so. But after they have made some progress, they are undeceived; and to their bitter experience they find, that “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth

unto life." Like a traveller just set out on his journey, who at first sees only a little portion of his way, and because it is plain, fondly hopes the whole will resemble it; but after he approaches some lofty hill, and ascends its summit, discovers many obstructions, and rough and slippery steps, formerly hid from his view; so it is with all Christian pilgrims. Usually they have not travelled long, till they perceive and feel their difficulties. They begin to discover more of the deceitfulness of their hearts, the strength of their corruptions, and the weakness of all their resolutions, and efforts. The world too, in its cares and enjoyments, and the men of the world by their unholy example and conversation, they find greater enemies to their souls than they had believed. And they begin to experience Satan's malignant devices. He annoys them with his temptations, tries to drive them from their trust in Christ, and to urge them to the performance of what is dishonouring to his cause, and injurious to their souls.—Now, it is to be remarked, that he who is experimentally ignorant of these difficulties, if a Christian at all, is only a babe in grace. But he, on the contrary, who is becoming more sensible of them, and yet is excited to overcome them, is certainly growing in grace.

3. An humble sense of his own weakness, and a more steady dependence on Christ, is another evidence of the Christian's growth in grace.—Young converts are usually most defective in both of these respects. Though they have been persuaded of their inability to do any thing, in the business of salvation, meritorious of the favour of God; and though they have placed their reliance wholly on the finished work of Christ for pardon and eternal life; yet

still they are far from being duly sensible of their own weakness and insufficiency, and of their continual need to rely on his assistance. At first they are so full of zeal, so animated and so ardent, that they imagine, like Peter, there is no service too great for them,—no temptation which they could not overcome,—no sacrifice which they would not be willing to make. Boldly they venture forward in their own strength, and are ready to chide the coldness and tardiness of others, who are far their superiors in gracious attainments, because they discover not the same rashness and impetuosity with themselves. Like children, full of spirit and self-confidence, who attempt to run before they have learned to walk, and refuse the aid of their nurse's hand, till they fall, and from painful experience are convinced of their own weakness; these young Christians are often so full of fervour, and so little acquainted with their need of constant dependence on the grace of Christ, that they rush onward till they too fall, and learn their insufficiency. Thus it was with the Psalmist:—"In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved, Lord, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong: thou didst hide thy face and I was troubled." *

This spirit, which has too much pride in it, accompanied though it be with sincere desires to honour Christ, and to do good to others, the Lord will bring down in all his children. He commands them not only to be active in duty, but to cherish an habitual sense of their weakness and insufficiency for its performance, and to exercise a continual reliance on his promised assistance. To every one of them his

* Psalm xxx. 6, 7.

solemn charge is, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he will direct thy path."*—After leaving them to feel their own weakness, and the painful effects of their falls, they are humbled to the very dust. They see and confess that their own wisdom is folly, and their strength weakness; and that without Christ they can do nothing. Gladly then do they look up to him for his proffered assistance, and earnestly do they plead the fulfilment of his promise, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness."† Thus they learn to "pass through the wilderness, leaning on the beloved."‡ Nor do they lean in vain; for "he giveth power to the faint, and to them who have no might he increaseth strength."§

This humble and self-distrustful spirit is a sure indication of growth in grace. Never do the children of God advance faster in the way to heaven, than when, diffident of themselves, they hang on the arm of Omnipotence. Like Paul each of them can say, "When I am weak, then am I strong"—the more humble I am under a sense of my own insufficiency, the more does the Lord lift me up.

4. Increasing victories over depraved propensities are evidential of growth in grace.—The power of sin is subdued, to such a degree, in all genuine saints, that it no longer reigns over them with unresisted sway. They are liberated from its thralldom, and do not obey its dictates habitually, and with the prevailing bent of their heart. In this respect, "all who are born of God sin not;"¶ or, as the original

* Prov. iii. 5, 6. † 2 Cor. xii. 9. ‡ Song viii. 5. § Isa. xl. 29.

¶ 2 Cor. xii. 10. ¶ 1 John iii. 9.

word signifies, "do not practise, or work sin," by pursuing it as their business and delight.—For wise purposes, God permits some remainders of their depraved propensities to continue within them. He thus keeps them in humble remembrance of their former slavery to sin, and corrects them for it,—teaches them what they still would be, but for the power of his grace,—and makes them more sensible of their need of Christ, and more dependent on him for protection and assistance. The consequence is, that they experience a continual struggle between the old and the new man,—corrupt nature, and the renewed heart. "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh : and these are contrary the one to the other; so that they cannot do the things that they would;"*—cannot live free from sin, and serve God with a perfect heart.

In this spiritual warfare, sometimes remaining depravity obtains the ascendancy over their new nature, and for a season carries them away captive. Its victory, however, is generally short-lived, and always sure to be followed by the triumphant success of Divine grace. Every one of them may adopt the language of the church, when her adversaries seemed victorious,—“ Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me.”†—And, in addition to this, these partial and temporary conquests of sin, painful as they are, God always overrules for promoting their greater advancement in holiness.—In this arduous but hopeful conflict, the progress of growth in grace is always marked by its increasing victories. They are more

* Gal. v. 17.

† Micah iv. 24.

frequent, and more easily won. Every depraved propensity, whether it be pride, or envy, or discontent, or worldly-mindedness, or any other unholy affection, or appetite, is found becoming weaker and weaker. Temptations to sin, though more frequent and powerful than they formerly were, are more easily resisted; and greater purity of heart and practice is maintained.

5. The habitual exercise of self-denial, is another proof of growth in grace.—Self-denial is one of the first lessons which Christ requires his followers to practise. Jesus said, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”* It is one of the most difficult lessons which they are called to learn,—a lesson, in the various branches of which, for a considerable time, they usually can make but little progress. Though, at the very commencement of their Christian course, they are enabled, in some measure, to exercise it, in regard to every forbidden indulgence, how pleasant soever, or seemingly profitable; and also in respect to reliance on their own righteousness as the ground of their hope for eternity; yet, in the last of these, they need daily to make advancement to the close of their pilgrimage. Something of a self-righteous spirit cleaves to them, and requires to be resisted to the end.—But in proportion to their progress in sanctification, they become more successful in this branch of self-denial. They more and more see the imperfection and deformity of their very best actions, and are more and more denied to all dependence on them. Instead of feeding their pride, they fill them with humility. They truly ac-

* Luke ix. 23.

count their own righteousness *filthy rags*,—a polluted covering which conceals not the defilement of their souls. The more they look at it, the more do they loathe themselves, and cry out with the convicted leper, “unclean, unclean!”

Besides, they who are growing in grace, actuated by a tender concern for the spiritual welfare of their brethren, like Paul,* are denied to their *own gratification* in the use of some things which are lawful. Rather than offend and ensnare others by their example, they sacrifice somewhat of their own enjoyment.—And even when they are in no hazard of endangering others by their pattern, they deny themselves in fashionable luxuries, superfluities of dress, &c. that they may have it more in their power to do good to their fellow men,—to multiply their benefactions to the poor, and to contribute to the support of useful institutions, and the spread of the pure gospel of salvation.—They are habitually denied to all *pride of understanding*, and dependence on their own wisdom. Believing the humiliating declaration of the prophet Jeremiah,—“O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps,”—they dare not rely on their own judgment, and follow their own decisions, without first asking, in every step, the counsel and direction of their heavenly Father.—They are denied to their *own will*, not presuming in any case to pursue their own inclinations, when they oppose the revealed will of God. Painful though this may be, they know that in the end they shall see it is best for them. Thus, while they pray to God, “Thy will be done, and not

* Rom. xiv. 19–21; 1 Cor. viii. 13.

ours," their practice corresponds to their petitions.—They are denied to the tenderest *attachments of kindred* and connexions, and to all their earthly possessions, honours, and comforts, when they would hinder them from duty, and stand between them and Christ. Without hesitation they forsake them all, rather than deny their Saviour.—In fine, they are denied to *natural life* itself, and stand ready to part with it for Christ's honour, and for promoting the interests of his truth and cause. They know who has said, "Whosoever will save his life, shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake, shall find it."*

6. That man is growing in grace, who feels an increasing relish for religious duties, and more spirituality in observing them.—We can readily judge of the health of the body, from its relish for its necessary food. If it loathe it, or at least discover no desire for it, and be incapable of relishing and digesting it; we hesitate not to pronounce it in an unsound state. But when it longs for its provision, and receives it with pleasure, we account it a sure indication of thriving health.—In a similar way we may judge respecting the health and prosperity of the soul. When it manifests lukewarmness and indifference for its spiritual sustenance, shuns the means by which it may be obtained, or observes them with formality and languor, it cannot be growing in grace. But, on the contrary, when its hungering and thirsting for the bread and water of life become stronger and stronger,—when it desires to be oftener engaged in religious duties, and experiences a more sensible delight in them, as me-

* Matt. xvi. 25.

diums of fellowship with Christ, and means of receiving from him the promised communications of his grace; there can be no doubt that it is advancing to the fulness of the stature of Christian perfection.

But though a relish for religious duties, manifested by a steady and conscientious observance of them, is an evidence of a growing Christian; yet it is still more so when they are performed with habitual spirituality. It is this which constitutes the very soul of religious services. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth."* All the children of God in some measure do so. They are sincere in their professions of homage; their heart is in their work; and their views and aims in it are, to promote the honour of God, and their own spiritual improvement.—Too frequently, it is true, the best of them feel it otherwise. They pursue the round of duty while the heart is wanting, or at least but little engaged. Wandering and worldly thoughts are indulged, and the glory of God and their souls' interests are almost forgotten.—Not so with them who are growing in grace. Impressed with the belief, that mere bodily exercise in religion profiteth little, and that it is to the heart God chiefly looketh; they are deeply concerned to have all the powers of their mind engaged in his service. Their desires are to him, and to the remembrance of his name. Looking up to the Spirit of all grace for his quickening and illuminating influences, they worship the Lord in the beauties of holiness.

7. Another evidence is, increasing tenderness of

* John iv. 24.

conscience, and watchfulness against sin.—The conscience, in common with all the faculties of the soul, participates of the renovating operations of the Spirit of God, in regeneration. Though formerly it might have become “seared as with a hot iron,”—unfeeling and unfaithful; yet thenceforward it is in some measure qualified for its functions, and proves a vigilant monitor. According to the degree of *light* which every Christian possesses, it warns him when he is in danger of sinning, and reproves him when he violates the law of God. As this light, however, is communicated only progressively, the improvement of his conscience must correspond. In proportion as he becomes more fully apprized of the immense evil of sin, and of the spirituality and extent of that Divine law by which it is condemned; this vicegerent of heaven is better qualified for its office, and discharges it with greater effect. Consequently, that Christian who is farthest advanced in knowledge and spiritual illumination, will dread sin, and flee from its appearance, more readily than those who have made less progress in spiritual attainments.

A tender conscience, therefore, is an evidence of an advanced Christian. But it is not every kind of tenderness which is a proof of this. So far from this, there is a scrupulosity which is indicative of ignorance and weakness of mind. Persons of this stamp will manifest a squeamishness in regard to the merest trifles, while yet they will so boldly venture on forbidden ground, or at least approach so near to it, that every wise and good man must blame their temerity, and tremble at their danger. As our Lord expressed it concerning the Pharisees, so

it may be said of them; “ They strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel.”

Tenderness of conscience, arising from scriptural knowledge and divine illumination, is always productive of watchfulness against sin. They who are blessed with it, possess a quick sensitiveness of soul, which makes them shrink from the approach of this deadly enemy. They know how deceitful it is, assuming innocent appearances, and pleading specious pretences. They are aware that if they tamper with its temptations, they are in imminent hazard of being overcome. They are taught how dishonouring it is to God, whose law it violates, and whose threatenings it contemns,—how insulting it is to Christ, who shed his blood to redeem his people from all iniquity, and to purify them to himself, a peculiar people, zealous of good works,—and how grieving it is to the Holy Spirit, by whom they are sealed to the day of redemption. And they are apprized of the incalculable mischief which it would do to the interests of religion, the peace of their Christian brethren, and their own immortal souls. With jealous eye, therefore, do they guard against it, in its fairest and most flattering appearances; and with steadfastness do they resist it, “ striving against sin.” Thus, in all things, they endeavour to have a conscience void of offence, both toward God and to their fellow men.

8. Another proof of growth in grace is, a lively concern for the prosperity of Christ’s church.—All genuine saints are loyal subjects of the Lord Jesus Christ, the divinely constituted King of Zion. The prosperity of his kingdom, therefore, is dear to their soul, and animates them with gladness; whereas

every thing which retards its advancement, and tarnishes its glory, fills them with unfeigned sorrow. With the captive citizens of Zion every one of them can cordially join in saying, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."*—The degree of concern experienced by the children of God for the spiritual interests of Christ's cause in the world, is usually proportioned to their advancement in holiness. During the first period of their Christian life, their concern is chiefly engaged about their own salvation, and that of their more immediate connexions and acquaintances: but after they begin to grow in grace, their views are enlarged, and the benevolence of their heart is expanded;—they look to the general state of the church, and of the world; and their hearts' desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they may be saved.

When the church meets with seasons of darkness and threatening danger, they are greatly troubled. When the children of Zion seem to them to be generally in a state of spiritual slumber, and the enlivening influences of the Holy Ghost appear to be stayed; and when, amid much of the profession and form of godliness, they see little of its sanctifying power exemplified; they are deeply grieved, and wrestle with the Lord for renewed times of refreshing from his presence. When errors which affect the fundamental truths of Christianity are boldly propagated, and greedily embraced by multitudes; they do what they can to counteract their ruinous

* Psalm cxxxvii. 5, 6.

influence. When members of the Church, deemed eminent for piety, fall into the commission of foul and scandalous crimes, or openly apostatize from the faith; they weep for them in secret, and plead for their rescue from perdition. In fine, they tenderly sympathise with the church in all her trials, and habitually bear her interests on their hearts. The language of every one of them is—"For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth."*

It follows of course, that the prosperity of the church will afford them much consolation, and excite them to holy gratitude and thanksgiving. When seasons of revival come from the Lord, and multitudes of converts are added to the household of faith, and they who through grace have already believed, are enlivened in the service of God, and abound in the fruits of righteousness; their souls are made to rejoice. And when they hear the tidings from distant lands, that the people who sat in darkness, are now enjoying the life-giving beams of the sun of righteousness, and that they have abandoned their foolish and debasing superstitions, and are bowing to the sceptre of Christ; their hearts thrill with gladness;—they view it as a prelude to the promised triumphs of the gospel, when "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea;" and for the arrival of that blissful period they wisely look forward, and earnestly pray.

9. Meekness under injuries, and a spirit of forgiveness, is a farther proof of growth in grace.—The wisest

* Isaiah lxii. 1.

and most beneficent men on earth, inoffensively, piously, and usefully as they may demean themselves, must lay their account with unprovoked insults and injuries. This was the lot of our Redeemer himself; and it is enough if the servant be as his master. But as he, when reproached, reproached not again, but calmly endured the contradiction of sinners against himself; so ought all his disciples to act amid similar trials of their faith and patience. And thus, in some measure, all will endeavour to act who have learned of Christ, and who are studying to copy his pattern. Instead of allowing themselves, under bad treatment, to be carried away by sudden gusts of fiery resentment, and speaking unadvisedly and impiously with their lips; they will try to keep a bridle both on their temper and their tongue. Instead of putting always the worst construction on every offence they receive; they will take into account all the alleviating circumstances of which the case will admit, and become the very apologists of their adversaries. Yea, even when necessitated to reprove, or to punish, they will mingle with the painful duty somewhat of Christian meekness.

Besides, their growth in grace will be marked by a forgiving and pacific disposition. Far from yielding to the natural propensities of the heart, and the much-lauded custom of the world, which loudly call for retaliation and revenge; they humbly listen to the authoritative language of Christ,—“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you.” “If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses,

neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.”* In obedience to his command, therefore, and in imitation of his example, they endeavour from the heart to forgive those who injure them,—to cherish no ill will against them, but rather to desire both their temporal and their eternal welfare,—and to return them good for evil. Remembering that God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven them so much, they account it a small matter, for his sake, to forgive the offences done to themselves.

10. Receiving with calmness and love the reproofs of good men, is also an evidence of growth in grace.—That every Christian is bound to manifest his love to his brethren in Christ, by faithfully warning them of danger to which he sees them exposed, and by telling them of sin in which he knows they indulge, is abundantly evident from the word of God. “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart; thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.” “Rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.” “Exhort one another daily, while it is called to-day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”† This, however, is a duty which requires to be performed with much judgment and delicacy; and which ought to be done, in general, with privacy. Unless it be done with great prudence and affection, and obviously appear intended for the benefit of the offender; it will provoke his resentment, rather than lead him to repentance and reformation.

But if it be difficult to administer reproof, it is far more difficult to receive it with a becoming spirit. The person reproofed generally accounts himself in-

* Matt. v 44; vi. 14, 15.

† Levit. xix. 17. Prov. ix. 8. Heb. iii. 13.

sulted ; and instead of viewing the admonition given to him, however cautiously it may have been tendered, as a mark of kindness, regards it as an evidence of hatred. Indeed, nothing but Christian humility, and a deep and affecting sense of his own unworthiness, can enable any man, with calmness and love, to acquiesce in reproof. Even the genuine Christian must be well advanced in growth in grace, ere his heart will meekly and thankfully bow to such brotherly treatment. The Psalmist, David, was enabled thus to act : “ Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness ; and let him reprove me, it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head.”* And every one who, like him, is ripening in holiness, will be enabled to adopt his language and to imitate his example. He will consider such reproofs as tokens of brotherly concern for his spiritual welfare ; and will regard him who wisely administers them, as God’s messenger sent to him for his good. He will, therefore, love him, and pray for his prosperity.

11. A grateful spirit for even common and small mercies, is a concomitant of growth in grace.—Mankind are seldom as sensible of their mercies, as they are of their trials. The former are too frequently overlooked, while the latter command attention. But keenly as men feel their wants and afflictions, and earnestly as they supplicate the Lord for deliverance from them ; they often forget their obligations to him, when he grants them relief. Their conduct resembles that of the lepers who were cleansed by our Lord. Though *ten* of them at once implored him to have mercy on them, and received the blessing which they sought ; yet only *one* returned gratefully to

* Psal. cxli. 5.

acknowledge his obligations.* The complaint which God uttered respecting his people Israel, is still applicable to the great majority of our race : "Hear, O heavens ; and give ear, O earth ; for the Lord hath spoken : I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib : but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider."†

Nor is this base spirit confined to those who are unrenewed in heart. Too much of it characterises the children of God. While they are truly grateful for Christ, God's unspeakable gift, and for the rich blessings of his grace ; they are too prone to think little of their obligations for common and smaller mercies. General expressions of thankfulness for them, it is true, are daily presented by them to the Lord : but they too seldom flow from a proper sense of God's kindness, even in the smallest of his favours.—In proportion as they grow in grace, the amiable spirit of gratitude increases. Like the patriarch Jacob, every one of them is disposed from the heart to say to God, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant."‡ Though their share of earthly good things should be small, like the crumbs which fall from the table of his providential bounty ; yet they are deeply sensible of their unworthiness of them, and thankfully express their obligations for them. Their food, their raiment, their habitation, their health, and their every temporal blessing, are received with gratitude, and acknowledged with praise. When they compare their condition, in these respects, with that of others around them, they are

* Luke xvii. 12—18.

† Isaiah i. 2, 3.

‡ Gen. xxxii. 10.

constrained often to exclaim, "Bless the Lord, O our souls, and forget not all his benefits."

12. A sure evidence of growth in grace is, resign-
edness to the will of God under trials and afflictions.—
It is no difficult task to manifest something like acquiescence in the allotments of Providence, during the sunshine of prosperity. When the world smiles, and friends caress, and we have all that our hearts can desire, to fret and repine would be unnatural; but to remain calm and unruffled amid the gloom of adversity, and to approve when God smites us, and takes from us our dearest worldly comforts, is not so easy. And yet this is required of God's children, and frequently has been exemplified by them. Aaron, when his sons Nadab and Abihu were consumed for offering strange fire, submissively "held his peace." Under painful chastisements from the hand of God, David could say, "I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, for thou didst it." Good old Eli, when informed of the awful fate which awaited his wicked sons, thus resignedly expressed himself: "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good." And the patriarch Job, amid heavier and more complicated trials than ever, perhaps, met in the lot of any other saint, thus expressed himself: "The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away; and blessed be the name of the Lord."

Like those saints of former times, all who have made progress in growth in grace, manifest, under trials, resignedness to the will of their heavenly Father. They calmly refrain from repining, not from stoical insensibility, or stubborn pride, but from humble acquiescence in the equity and wisdom of his allotments. Heavy though they may be, they

know that they are lighter than they have deserved, and that they are part of the discipline of God's covenant, by which his children are prepared for glory. They have learned, that instead of being tokens of wrath, they are marks of God's adopting love. Like salutary medicine, though bitter, he administers them to his children, to promote their spiritual health. They know that it is thus written, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not?"* Reflecting, therefore, on God's kind designs in their trials and distresses; the promises of his presence and support under them; and that soon they shall all terminate, and be followed by happiness unmingled and everlasting; under the most painful of them they can joyfully say, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory: while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."† "We reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."‡

13. The last evidence of growth in grace which I shall here mention is, a habitual recognition of the presence of God, and a desire to act in all things for his glory.—Every Christian believes the truth of Jehovah's omniscience and omnipresence. They

* Heb. xii. 5—7.

† 2 Cor. iv. 17, 18.

‡ Rom. viii. 18.

all know, that "the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good;" and that "neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight; but all things are naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."* Amid the bustle of earthly pursuits, however, they too often forget that they are in the presence of God. Though none of them can habitually live in the neglect of this; yet these only who are advancing in the divine life, are habitually impressed with its remembrance. But all who are in this prosperous state, are daily disposed to adopt the Psalmist's language, and to act under an abiding conviction of its truth,—“O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising; thou understandest my thoughts afar off. Thou compassedst my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before,” &c.†

Habitually impressed with this belief, like Enoch, they walk with God. They see him in all his works, trace him in all his providential allotments, and enjoy him in all his mercies. They hear his voice in the rolling thunder and the terrific storm, as well as in the gladdening message of the gospel. When visited with trials and afflictions, they view him at hand, to minister support and consolation; and, in his own time and way, to accomplish their deliverance. When assailed with temptations, believing that his eye is fixed upon them, they are animated with courage to repel them, saying, in the words of

* Prov. xv. 3; Heb. iv. 13.

† Psalm cxxxix. 1, &c.

the pious Hebrew youth, "How shall we do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" When called to the performance of difficult services, they look to him for his promised assistance, and find him near to give them help. And, in pursuing the common business of life, they habitually endeavour to act in such a manner as to have the approbation of God and of conscience. Thus, in all things, demeaning themselves as seeing him who is invisible, and making his word the rule of their conduct, and his glory their chief aim; they enjoy daily fellowship with God.

Such are a few of the most striking evidences of growth in grace. Happy are you, my reader, if you find them applicable to your case. They are sure prognostications that you are ripening apace for celestial glory. Animated with this hope, aspire after yet higher attainments in holiness. Like Paul, "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."*

* Philip. iii, 13.

CHAPTER X.

HINDERANCES OF GROWTH IN GRACE, AND SYMPTOMS OF SPIRITUAL DECLINE.

1. Growth in grace is often prevented by the influence of worldly relatives and companions.—2. By embarking too deeply in worldly business.—3. By approximations to fraudulence, for the sake of gain.—4. By devoting too much time to world's amusements.—5. By immoderate attachment to any earthly object.—6. By indulging in acrimonious controversies, whether religious or political.—7. By attendance on an unbelieving and unfaithful minister.—8. By the languid and formal observance of religious duties.—9. By the frequent omission of religious duties.—10. By shunning the society and religious converse of Christian friends.—11. By relapses into known sin.

To prevent any dangerous bodily disease is of much greater importance, than to know how it may be cured. For this purpose it is necessary that the causes which produce it, and the symptoms of its first approach, be carefully studied and distinctly known.—The case is similar in regard to the maladies of the soul. To secure its healthy state and growth in grace, ought to be the chief concern of every Christian; and with a view to this, he should endeavour to know, and to be on his guard against, every source of spiritual decay. The causes from which this originates are both numerous and various; and those which operate in one particular case, may have no influence in another. Still, however, there are certain causes which commonly produce this painful disease; and which, therefore, demand more

especial attention.—In attempting to set these before you, I shall couple the symptoms of declining in growth in grace, along with the hinderances of its advancement. They frequently run into each other; and the cause of the disease at length becomes a symptom of its existence. To prevent repetition, therefore, of the same particulars, though they might have been made two chapters, they are thus treated in one.

1. One of the causes which often first operates in preventing growth in grace is, the influence of worldly relatives and companions.—The company with which men habitually associate, has a powerful influence on their general character. Imperceptibly, and almost unavoidably, they become assimilated to them, in their language and gestures, their aversions and predilections, their habits and demeanour.—When the children of God, therefore, are doomed to dwell with carnal relatives and connexions, and to hear from their lips, day after day, nothing except what savours of the world; it can hardly fail to have a secularizing influence on their minds. Like a dead weight attached to them, it draws them downwards, and by degrees lessens their relish for religious society and converse, and unfits them for engaging with liveliness in devotional exercises.—The same effects result from their associating with worldly companions, who do not belong to their household. Whether they be led to this from accident, or necessity in prosecuting their business, or imprudent choice; the result is commonly hurtful. In some instances they may be instrumental in doing good to the souls of such persons; but when this is not their direct aim, and steadily kept in view, they far

oftener catch harm from them. At first they may not be sensible of this, and for a time may disrelish the earthly conversation of these associates; but by degrees it will become less offensive to them, till at length they can join it without reluctance as their habitual theme.—Such a course unavoidably must check their progress in holiness. In proportion as a relish for it is produced, a want of inclination for holy society, holy conference, and holy employments will grow upon them, till their religious declension become visible and alarming. And even before it has proceeded thus far, a marked preference for worldly companions, though they may not be openly wicked, is but too sure a symptom that spiritual decay has commenced.

How loudly does this call on the people of God, to be on their guard against forming family connexions with those who are obviously without the profession and form of godliness! Such unions, entered into from worldly motives, may cost them dear, and cause them to go on their way heavenward halting and mourning. How should it awaken those who are already in these circumstances, to a sense of their danger, and induce them to double their diligence in improving the means of grace, both in secret and in public, that they may be preserved from the deadening influence to which they are daily exposed! How ought this to excite God's children to shun all familiar intimacies and friendships with the men of the world! Conducive though some of them may be for a time to their honour, in the reckoning of blinded mortals; they shall ultimately find that they have been dishonouring to Christ, and injurious to their own souls. Let such persons listen

to the heavenly monition: "Know ye not that the friendship of this world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God."* "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a father unto you; and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."†

2. Another preventive of growth in grace is, embarking too deeply in worldly business.—Attention to the concerns of the present life, in one form or other, is the duty of every man, whatever be his rank in society. The religion of the Bible warrants no man, who is capable of exertion, to spend his time in idleness. On the contrary, it commands lawful industry; and binds every Christian to contribute his part, either by labour of body or mind, to the general good of our race.—Nor does it forbid the disciples of Christ to embark in business, even on a large scale, when they are qualified to prosecute it in subordination to their eternal interests. But it apprises them that such a post is attended with danger, —a post which few can occupy with safety, and fewer

* James iv. 4.

† 2 Cor. vi. 14—18.

still with spiritual prosperity. It tells them that it requires no common share of grace for persons, thus engaged, to maintain the life, the zeal, and the activity of growing Christians. And it puts them on their guard against the hazard to which they are exposed, of giving too much of their time, and care, and affections to things which perish with the using; and which, but too commonly, lead those engaged in them to a culpable neglect of their salvation.

Forgetful of this, and instigated by the example and counsel of worldly men around them, many of God's children plunge too deeply into secular transactions. Anxious to have it in their power to vie with their neighbours and acquaintance in rank and grandeur,—to make handsome provision for their families,—and to enjoy independence during the evening of life; they press into business far beyond what their capital will warrant, and venture on schemes of speculation, hazardous and distracting. So incessantly are their minds loaded with cares, and embarrassed with the management of their complicated plans, that they scarcely can find time and composure for the refreshment of their bodies with necessary food and sleep.

In such cases, scarcely is it possible that a due attention can be given to the concerns of the soul. The duties of religion, though they should not be utterly neglected, will be observed only with the lifeless formality of bodily service. The necessary consequence of all this must be, a decline in the life of grace. And thus it may continue with them, till God either blast their plans, or cast them into the fiery furnace of affliction. So true is the testimony of our Lord, that “the cares of the world, and the

deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and men become unfruitful.”* And so applicable are the words of an apostle; “They that will be rich fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil; which while some have coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” Let every child of God, therefore, remember the admonition given in the words which immediately follow: “But thou, O man of God, flee these things, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art called.”†

3. Approximations to fraudulence for the sake of gain, are another hinderance to growth in grace.—It is natural for every man who enters into business, to desire success. All who engage in it, are animated with the hope of this; and look forward to a time when their augmented income will reward their activity, and enlarge the sphere of their usefulness and enjoyment. A large measure of success, however, is not easily obtained. In the present state of society in our land, such is the competition among the great numbers embarked in almost every branch of business, that few comparatively can soon accumulate wealth. The consequence is, that they who find this impracticable by fair means, are too frequently tempted to have recourse to those which are disingenuous and somewhat fraudulent. Others, they learn, by a little worldly artifice, outstrip them in their profits, and

* Matt. xiii. 22.

† 1 Tim. vi. 9—12.

rise in society, while they are scarcely able to stand their ground. Some of them are tempted, therefore, to try the plans of these worldly men, notwithstanding they know that they are not consistent with strict integrity, and unbending justice. As this practice may often be pursued without detection ; so, after a time, it may be accompanied with little self-reproach.

While there is reason to believe that this practice is incautiously gone into by some who are genuine Christians, there can be no doubt that it is always detrimental to their soul. Their worldly gain is made at the expense of their spiritual loss. How common soever it may be among those around, and how necessary soever it may be deemed to ensure success ; never can they who follow this practice, totally banish from their minds the conviction, that it is improper in itself, and a violation of the perfect rule of equity. Acting, however, as they do, contrary to this conviction, they hurt their conscience and offend their God. So far from growing in grace, they gradually decline. Ill-gotten gain, like a gnawing worm at the root, will soon wither the blossoms of the stateliest tree of righteousness. Let those, therefore, who are tempted to hasten in this way to be rich, carefully guard against the most distant approach to this practice. As they value a pure conscience, and peace with God, let them scorn the gilded bait. And let them who already have been caught by it, speedily endeavour to be disentangled. Let them put away the unholy thing, and turn to the Lord with deep and unfeigned repentance.

4. Another hinderance to growth in grace is, de-

voting too much time to worldly amusements.—Christianity by no means forbids her votaries every kind of amusement and recreation. To affirm that she does, would be falsely and injuriously to exhibit her as the mother of gloom and melancholy; and consequently to act towards her the part of an enemy. She admits of every innocent gratification, which can contribute either to the health of the body, or the invigoration and improvement of the mind. No pleasure does she prohibit, except what is sinful, or calculated by its concomitants or consequences to prove hurtful to the soul. She interdicts only what every wise and good man should wish to shun.

But though the religion of Christ allows all innocent recreations and pleasures; yet they must be innocently used. They are not to be pursued as the sole, or even the principal, employment of any Christian, whatever may be his rank or his opulence. They are to be followed only as the minor auxiliaries of bodily health, and mental cheerfulness,—the means of unbending the mind, exhilarating the spirits, and of fitting us for the more lively and vigorous discharge of our duty.

Instead of this, however, some misled Christians devote too much of their time to a giddy round of amusements. This is the case chiefly among the middle and higher ranks of society. So incessantly are they hurried in planning or executing schemes of what they reckon innocent pleasure, that often they can scarcely find leisure, on week days, to attend even to the forms of domestic and secret religion. Employing almost the whole of their time in reading works of fiction,—studying and practis-

ing the mysteries of the toilet,—paying or receiving ceremonious visits,—and attending parties of pleasure till the most unseasonable hours; they feel little heart for the devotional duties either of the family or the closet. With such persons the Lord's day is almost the only time appropriated to the service of God, and the business of salvation; and the dissipation of the mind from the scenes of the past week, or the anticipation of new enjoyments, unfits it for spiritual and profitable worship on that hallowed rest.

The prosecution of this course, even for a short period, will mar any Christian's growth in grace. The words of the wise man are true, both in a worldly and spiritual acceptation,—“He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man,”*—poor in purse, and poor in grace. And yet it is but too certain, that some of the Lord's children are drawn into this course. By the influence of worldly connexions or acquaintances they are allured to follow it for a season, till they appear more like “lovers of pleasure, than lovers of God.” Every competent judge who knows it, must account it a sure symptom that their soul is not in a healthy condition. And, sooner or later, the Lord will chastise them for their folly, and turn them from it to the proper employment of their time and talents.

5. Immoderate attachment to any earthly object is another preventive of growth in grace.—Genuine piety sanctifies and improves our attachment to our relatives and friends. So far from destroying our love to them, it tends to invigorate, sweeten, and regulate all its operations. It leaves us not to the

* Prov. xxi. 17.

guidance of animal instinct, changeable caprice, or contracted self-interest. It teaches us to act on principle, and to testify affection for them, and concern for their happiness, from respect for the authority of God.—At the same time, it requires us carefully to guard against all excessive attachment to any person or object whatever. They to whom we are united by the closest ties of affinity or consanguinity, and the most valuable possessions and enjoyments which we fondly call our own, must occupy a place in our heart and affections, far inferior to that which is given to our God and Saviour. So inferior must it be, that the former, compared with the latter, may be reckoned as hatred. Hence these emphatic words of our Lord; “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”* Or, as he himself explains it in another place; “He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me.”†

Though this supreme love to Christ is certainly characteristic of all genuine saints; yet it is too frequently, for a time, supplanted by their attachment to some earthly object. Viewed with overweening fondness, by degrees it obtains the ascendancy in their affections. For it they seem to live; and, should they be deprived of it, they conclude they must die of sorrow. All their thoughts, and cares, and expressions of fond endearment, are lavished upon it; and scarcely is it possible for them to engage in the most solemn acts of religion, with-

* Luke xiv. 26.

† Matt. x. 37.

out feeling it occupy a principal share of their concern. Thus it becomes their idol.

This estrangement of heart from the Lord, must be displeasing in his sight. To see his ransomed people, for whom he has done such great things, and to whom he has given such glorious prospects, prefer any of his gifts to himself, by surrendering to them that place in their heart and affections which is his unalienable prerogative; must be accounted a base return for his love. In all cases of this kind, therefore, he chastises them, by hiding from them the light of his countenance, and withholding the wonted supplies of their spiritual life. Forthwith they languish and decay. In the mourning language of the Psalmist they are compelled to exclaim; "Our moisture is turned into the drought of summer:—our heart is smitten, and withered like grass."* And, in addition to this, he often snatches from them that darling object which they idolize, or renders it a curse to them, instead of a blessing. "If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory to my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings." "From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you."†

6. Indulging in acrimonious controversies, whether religious or political, prevents growth in grace. —Mankind, in their present imperfect state, must unavoidably differ in their sentiments on many subjects. As reasonably might we expect to bring them all to the same stature, complexion, and degree of mental improvement; as that they should see with the same eye, in matters pertaining either to

* Psalm xxxii. 4; cii. 4.

† Mal. ii. 2; Ezek. xxxvi. 25.

church or state. Every man who reflects how impracticable it is for him to force himself to entertain precisely the same views, on all points, with his neighbour; ought to be ready to make that allowance to him, which he claims for himself. Yet, forgetful of this, too many are apt to regard their own opinions, in every matter, as infallibly correct; and those of persons who differ from them, as unquestionably erroneous:—in other words, they wish to set themselves up as standards of perfection.—The apostle Paul, when inculcating the exercise of charity, or Christian love, sharply reprimands this haughty and dogmatical spirit:—"Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."*

In direct violation of these Christian principles, some of the followers of Christ give themselves too much up to a disputatious spirit. When they meet with those who differ from them in opinion, though it be in matters doubtful in themselves, or at best of comparatively little importance; reckless of consequences, they rush into the briery thicket of controversy. They ardently defend their own views, and fiercely attack those of their opponents, till they excite their hatred, rather than produce their conviction; and ruffle and inflame their own mind. By

* 1 Cor. xiii. 4—10.

indulging in this practice, they hurt both themselves and their neighbours. Scarcely is it possible that a Christian who gives way to this wrangling spirit, can make progress in holiness. His attention is too much directed to matters which cannot profit his soul, and too little to those things which pertain to his peace and improvement.

7. Another hinderance to growth in grace, is attendance on an unbelieving and unfaithful minister. That some, who are invested with the office of the holy ministry, are indifferent about their own salvation, is a lamentable fact which cannot be concealed. There was a Judas among the first twelve; and that there should be some traitors to the Redeemer, in our day, among the hundreds and thousands who embark in this sacred calling, is not to be wondered at. Such men, artfully as they may, for a time, mimic the earnestness and diligence of them who are faithful pastors of Christ's flock, sooner or later will betray their want of concern for his glory, and the salvation of sinners. Though we should suppose that, for the sake of holding their place and of gaining applause, their sermons in the main should be sound and evangelical; yet they will want much of that holy fervour, and unction of vital godliness, which flow from a renewed and sanctified heart. Ignorant of the difficulties and trials connected with the Christian life, their preaching must, in a great degree, be destitute of that practical and experimental character, necessary to the edification and spiritual comfort of genuine believers. Besides, when called to visit them in private, and to converse with them under their trials and afflictions,—to obviate their doubts and fears,—to arm them against their

temptations,—to bind up the broken-hearted,—and to comfort all that mourn; their unfitness for such departments of their duty must be seen and felt. And, in addition to all this, their worldly, careless, and unbecoming example, known as it soon must generally be by their flock, will defeat their best preaching. Not only will the profane regard it a merely official exhibition, like the part of an actor on the stage; but the pious will find a dead weight attached to every sentence from the lips of such ministers.

That persons who regularly sit under such careless pastors should be in a state of lukewarmness, is just what we might expect. Indeed, the wonder would be to find it otherwise. In their case we only see the proverb verified,—“like priest, like people.”* Few,—very few instances are to be found of lively, zealous, and growing Christians, placed in such circumstances. Where God, in awful judgment, permits those ravening wolves in sheep’s clothing to enter into the fold, the deadly mischief resulting from their ministrations soon becomes apparent. A spiritual lethargy spreads among their flock. Even the children of God among them catch the benumbing infection. Instead of flourishing in the courts of God’s house, and abounding in the fruits of righteousness; they appear like trees from which the dews and refreshing showers of heaven are withheld.

8. The languid and formal observance of religious duties, prevents growth in grace.—Though God has expressly required his children to employ all the appointed means of grace, for promoting their advancement in holiness; yet it is not the merely mechan-

* Hosea iv. 9.

cal observance of them, how frequent and regular soever that may be, which is productive of this effect. The Lord, it is true, must have a respect to his own institutions, and will bestow the blessing annexed to the observance of them, when it is rightly performed. But it is only when they are engaged in from proper motives and aims,—a supreme regard to his authority, and a desire to advance his glory, and their own spiritual interests,—that he can approve their religious services. While he claims the homage both of the body and the soul; it is to the latter that he chiefly looks. When the heart is wanting, the veneration of the lip is of no value in his estimation.

The best of God's people are far from performing religious duties, always, in a lively and spiritual manner. Too frequently they have cause to confess and bewail their coldness and formality. But while this may be occasionally the case with them who are growing in grace; no advancement can be made in the divine life, when it becomes for a season habitual. Yet such is the lifeless frame of spirit to which they often subject themselves, from excessive worldly cares and attachments, and the deadening influence of worldly friends.—Not daring, however, to neglect the appointed means of grace, little heart as they feel for them, they are satisfied for a time with their form. The religious duties of the closet, the family, and the public worshipping assembly, are observed with a cold and spiritless formality, day after day, and week after week. But no spiritual advantage is derived from them. Instead of smiling on such services, and rendering them instrumental to their quickening and advancement in holiness; they meet

with Jehovah's frown. They come up as smoke in his nostrils; and he testifies his displeasure with his children for thus offering to him the blind and the lame. The fructifying influences of his Spirit are restrained from them; and, instead of growing in grace, they suffer a woful declension.

9. Another hinderance to growth in grace is, the frequent omission of religious duties.—God's children all know that it is their commanded duty, to use the means of grace with steadfastness and perseverance. Yet in too many cases they act contrary to their knowledge. For very trifling reasons they are, sometimes, induced to neglect the observance of some one or other of the religious services, required for their improvement. When they happen to be more than commonly fatigued with the cares or toils of business,—when they have less time or convenience than usual,—when their mind has been disquieted and ruffled by any teasing occurrence,—or when they have been receiving or paying visits till a late hour; the reading of the Scriptures, meditation, self-examination, and the prayers of the family and the closet, are omitted. Though they may have no intention at first to repeat the omission, unless for a very urgent reason; yet, having yielded once, they are more easily induced to yield a second time. By degrees their excuses multiply, and their neglect of duty becomes too frequent; till at length they begin to omit, sometimes, the public ordinances of Christ.

Such conduct is at once the symptom, and the cause, of sad decline. Their souls, deprived of their accustomed refreshment, soon begin to languish. Like flowers in a garden, which fade and droop;

when the rills by which they are watered are frequently shut up; their graces not only cease to grow, but begin to wither. Through his own appointed means of grace, like so many channels, God conveys to the souls of his people those refreshing and fructifying influences of his Spirit, by which they "spring up as willows by the water courses."* Nor does he warrant them, in any other way, to expect these divine influences, when the mediums of obtaining them are sinfully neglected. When his children, therefore, are chargeable with this guilt, their souls cannot be in health and prosper. Their famished and sickly condition will soon become apparent.—Warned by the assurance of this, let them steadfastly resist every temptation to the omission of duty; and, instead of relaxing their diligence in observing the means appointed for their improvement, let them increasingly abound, till the short period allotted for it comes to a close.

10. Shunning the society and religious converse of Christian friends, is both a cause and a symptom of declining in piety.—It is natural for affectionate and dutiful children of the same family to desire each other's company, and to feel pleasure in each other's intimate and familiar conversation. The ties of relationship by which they are bound together, and the interest which they take in each other's welfare, and in the honour and prosperity of their beloved father's house; induce them to prefer each other's society to that of strangers. Especially it will be so, when they are sojourners in a foreign land.—The case is similar with the children of God. Knit together by ties stronger far than those

* Isaiah xlv. 4.

of blood,—ties the most tender and indissoluble, they “love one another with a pure heart fervently.” Viewing each other as children of the same heavenly Father,—partakers of the same faith and hope,—fellow pilgrims on their way to the same country,—exposed to the same enemies and dangers,—protected and guided by the same almighty and unerring Leader,—joint heirs of the same glorious inheritance,—and expectants of dwelling together eternally in the same house of many mansions; they cannot but delight in mutually associating, to converse respecting their present condition and their future prospects.

The case of any Christian, therefore, is very unpromising, when he begins to manifest a coolness and indifference to the company of his pious brethren. When, without any reasonable excuse, he visits them not so frequently as he was accustomed,—is always in haste to get away, when he does visit them,—studiously avoids entering into religious conversation with them,—and manifests uneasiness to get off, when they introduce subjects of this nature; there is no room to doubt that something is wrong. When the Christian is growing in grace, the very reverse of all this is characteristic of his temper and practice. Few as his godly acquaintances may be, if he could, he would desire to be very frequently in their company; and, when practicable, to improve such interviews in devotional exercises, and in talking of the good land to which they are journeying.—All, therefore, who are conscious of diminished relish for the society and religious converse of their Christian brethren, and a desire to find apologies for absenting themselves from their

company, have reason to account themselves in a state of spiritual backsliding.

11. The last hinderance to growth in grace which I shall here specify, is relapses into known sin.—Instances of this nature occur but too frequently. Many of the Lord's children have been left to feel their weakness, and to fall by temptations which they, at one time, thought it impossible should overcome them. Peter, when forewarned by Christ, that after a very short time, he should deny him, could not imagine that he should ever be guilty of a crime so base. With sanguine protestations, therefore, he rashly ventured to reply, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." And yet the event verified the prediction. Three several times, in rapid succession, he denied the Lord who bought him.—Like him, they who are actuated by supreme love to Christ, and who deem themselves prepared to suffer martyrdom for his sake, rather than to dishonour him by sins into which others have fallen; sometimes soon imitate their example. Proudly trusting too much to their own strength, they have been made to experience their extreme weakness. The easily-besetting sin which formerly held them in bondage, and which with abhorrence they had long abandoned, may obtain a fresh victory over them. Or some other temptation, which they least suspect or dread, may vanquish them, and "bring them into captivity to the law of sin which is in their members."

The mischief resulting from such falls is incalculable. If they are of a public and scandalous nature, they will bring great dishonour on the Redeemer's cause; wound their own souls, and strip

them of their peace; grieve the hearts of the godly; strengthen the prejudices of unbelievers against the gospel; and open their mouths to blaspheme that holy name by which we are called. Or, should they be of the most private or secret kind, and be hid from the knowledge of their most intimate friends; still their consequences must be painful and distressing to themselves. All their spiritual comfort for a season shall be taken away, and the deepest and most pungent anguish of heart shall be experienced. Their summer shall be turned into winter, their light into darkness, and their joy into sorrow. Instead of cheering progress in the way to the heavenly Zion, their career shall not only be arrested, but they shall be hurried backward. And thus will it continue with them till God has chastised them for their sinful relapse, and brought them, in deep repentance and a humble sense of their own insufficiency, to exercise greater vigilance and more steady reliance on his promised help.

Such then are some of the most common hinderances to growth in grace. Warned by this exposure of them, let it be your care, my dear reader, to watch against their pernicious influence. Flee from those of them which it is in your power to avoid; and steadfastly resist the temptation, presented by others of them, to which you are inevitably exposed. For this purpose, habitually rely on the all-sufficient grace of Christ, for "he giveth power to the faint, and to them who have no might he increaseth strength." And, while on the one hand, you guard against known danger; on the other, be active in improving those means which God has appointed for promoting your advancement in holiness. To

some of these I shall endeavour to direct your attention in the following chapter.

But should you already have discovered in yourself the symptoms of spiritual decline, let it be your first concern to ascertain the particular cause, or causes, from which it has originated. Whether it be any of the above-mentioned, or some other, as soon as you know it, determinedly set yourself against its farther wasting inroads. While you watch against every known preventive of growth in grace, in a peculiar manner set yourself in opposition to that which already has done you so much injury. Humbly confess to the Lord, and mourn over that iniquity. Plead for renewed intimations of forgiveness, and communications of wisdom and strength; and endeavour to double your diligence, in redeeming time, and improving your talents, during the short remainder of life.

CHAPTER XI.

MEANS OF PROMOTING GROWTH IN GRACE.

1. To grow in grace, you must increase in the knowledge of Christ, as revealed in the scriptures.—2. Be regular in attending the public ordinances of religion.—3. Be frequent in commemorating Christ's death.—4. Be careful to sanctify the Lord's day in private.—5. Frequently engage in religious meditation.—6. Often practise self-examination.—7. Abound in prayer, especially ejaculatory prayer.—8. Exercise habitual watchfulness.—9. Frequently converse with them who fear the Lord.—10. Often visit them who are in affliction, and on a death-bed.—11. Peruse often the memoirs of eminent saints.—12. Daily recognise the hand of God in his providential dispensations.—13. Occasionally set apart some time for a full and particular inquiry into your progress in holiness, and your preparation for eternity.

THAT the Holy Spirit is the great efficient agent in producing growth in grace, has already been stated.* Not only does he implant the divine seed, when he regenerates the soul; but he also waters and nourishes it by his unseen influences, and causes it to spring up till it bring forth fruit to eternal life. But in every stage of this process towards maturity, he usually works by means. Far from teaching his people to fold their arms and to sit down in indolence, expecting that he will do all, because they can do nothing effectually themselves; he expressly commands their co-operation in the use of these means which he has prescribed: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to do, of his good

* Chapter viii. sect. 3.

pleasure.”* While they follow his instructions, by diligently employing these means, he encourages them to expect from him all needful assistance. But when they indulge in sloth or self-sufficiency, he apprizes them that he will leave them to feel their own weakness, and chastise them for their sin.—To these means of promoting growth in grace, and the manner in which they should be employed, I shall now direct your attention.

1. One of these means is, increasing in the knowledge of Christ, as revealed in the scriptures.—This is particularly mentioned by the apostle Peter. Immediately after his exhortation, “grow in grace,” he subjoins, “and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”† Just as if he had said, “I beseech you, that in the diligent use of all proper means, you earnestly endeavour to grow in grace; and, for this purpose, especially study to acquire an increasing acquaintance with the person and work, the doctrines and ordinances, the commandments and promises, of our blessed Redeemer.”

The peculiar suitableness of this charge must be obvious to every one, who has attentively considered this subject. In the case of all who are favoured with the sacred scriptures, and who are capable of reading and understanding them, the communication of divine influences to their soul, for their advancement in holiness, is inseparably connected with increasing religious knowledge. Gross ignorance of divine truth, and saving grace, can no more exist in the same individual, than light and darkness can dwell in the same place. Equally impracticable is

* Phil. ii. 12, 13.

† 2 Pet. iii. 18.

it, that the Christian who is stationary in his religious knowledge, can be advancing in holiness. Nothing but the blindest enthusiasm can induce any man to believe the contrary. Increasing acquaintance with scripture truth is an invariable accompaniment of growth in grace; and is to be accounted one of the sources from which it springs,—one of the most important means by which it is promoted. Though much knowledge of divine things may be acquired, where it is followed by little Christian fruitfulness; yet the contrary never can happen. All therefore who would make progress in growth in grace must increase “in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Now, as this knowledge is contained in the Bible, it is by the diligent perusal of this holy volume that it is to be obtained. If you, my reader, desire to make progress in conformity to the image of Christ, and in meetness for the heavenly inheritance, occupy much of your time in reading and studying those lively oracles of God. Read them *frequently*, every day searching them as in quest of hid treasure. Read them with *holy reverence* as the word of the living God. Read them with child-like *docility* of spirit, humbly submitting in all things to their divine authority. Read them with *earnest attention*, diligently endeavouring to understand their import. Read them with *fervent prayer*, that your eyes may be opened to behold the wonderful things which they contain. Read them with a view to your own *spiritual improvement*,—to know the mind of Christ, and to do his will. This is not only the invaluable privilege of every Christian in our land, but his imperative duty. Christ himself commands it: “Search

the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me."* Consequently, they who presumptuously forbid it, and they who carelessly neglect it, alike reject the authority of Zion's King.

In searching the scriptures for an increasing knowledge of the character, work, and will of Christ, you ought not to confine yourself to the New Testament. This portion of the sacred volume, it is true, contains the fullest and clearest exhibition of Christ. But the whole Bible, in one form or other, points to him as the sum and substance of revelation. Here he is prefigured in the typical persons, the washings, the sacrifices, and the ritual observances of the Mosaic economy; his incarnation, sufferings, and death, and the glorious triumphs of his kingdom, are foretold by the prophets; and the blessings of his salvation are made sure by the promises.—Search, therefore, for Christ in the law, the Psalms, and the prophets, as well as in the writings of the evangelists and apostles; and the more intimately you know him, the more will you admire and love him. Fresh beauties and glories will every day present themselves to your contemplation. Wonders of wisdom, love, grace, and holiness will continually rise in your view. Here you will find full scope for the exercise of your intellectual powers, with endless improvement, and ever new delight. The object is infinite; and what should excite you to diligence, and stimulate you to excel in this knowledge is, that the more you know, the greater will be your holiness and true enjoyment.

2. Regular attendance on the public ordinances

* John v. 39.

of religion, is another means of growing in grace.—The apostle Paul particularly specifies this as one important design of the public ministrations of the gospel: “When Christ ascended up on high, he gave gifts unto men. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”* As he has given to his church ministers, and appointed to her ordinances of worship and Christian communion, for the edification of his people; so it is incumbent on them to wait upon these institutions with regularity. This they are bound to do, by the express instructions of God’s word, by the example of Christ, by apostolic usage, and by a regard to their own spiritual and immortal interests. By associating on the Lord’s day in public worship, their thoughts and affections are called away from the things of earth, and directed to the concerns of eternity. How much the majority of Christians need this, whose time and attention are so engrossed by the world on other days, must be obvious to every reflecting mind; and how well fitted the religious services of the sanctuary are to accomplish this end, is equally evident. By this means their acquaintance with divine things is promoted; increasing knowledge of the doctrines and duties of our holy religion is obtained; and the truths which they already know are recalled to their remembrance, and re-impressed on their minds. By this means the

* Ephes. iv. 8—15.

civil distinctions which separate the rich from the poor, are in some degree broken down and forgotten; all meet at the throne of grace, and at the table of Christ, on the same level; their love to the brethren is exercised and strengthened; and communion with the saints is maintained. By this means they place themselves within the reach of Christ's promised presence and blessing; are admitted to fellowship with him; receive supplies of grace from his fulness; and are made "to flourish in the courts of our God." In fine, by this means often those of them who are captives are set free; the broken-hearted bound up; the mourner in Zion comforted; the wavering established; the doubting confirmed; the bowed down raised up; the weak strengthened; the tempted delivered; and they who are in darkness brought to the enjoyment of light.

If you, my reader, desire to share of these advantages, be conscientiously regular in your attendance on the public ordinances of Christ. Never absent yourself from them, unless your excuse be of such a nature, that you can hope it will be sustained by God. Let your love to your Redeemer appear in the respect which you manifest to the institutions of his appointment,—institutions in which he has engaged to meet with his people, and to bless them. Let the language of your practice, as well as of your lips, be that of the Psalmist; "Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honour dwelleth."*

3. Another means of growth in grace is, the frequent commemoration of Christ's death.—As this is one of the public ordinances of religion, it is properly

* Psalm xxvi. 8.

included under the preceding section. Because of its particular importance, however, as well as its too general infrequency, I wish to give it a distinct specification.—That the Lord's Supper was administered every Sabbath in the Christian churches, during the apostolic age, and for three succeeding centuries, will not admit of contradiction. In addition to what is said respecting it in scripture,* ecclesiastical history amply confirms this fact. Its infrequency is, without doubt, one of those corruptions of later times, from which the churches of Christ, in general, yet need to be purified. Influenced by custom, however, and something of a superstitious veneration for this ordinance, as if it were too holy to be frequently observed; many professing Christians satisfy themselves with engaging in it simply once, or at most twice in a year. Nor is this the case with those of us who are members of churches where the prevailing usage puts it, in a great measure, out of their power to sit down oftener at the Table of the Lord. Even where it has begun to be more frequently observed, some professing disciples of Christ content themselves with their former accustomed infrequency.—This practice is dishonouring to the memory of Christ, contrary to the nature and design of this institution, and hurtful to their own souls. As Jesus appointed this ordinance to keep up the lively and grateful remembrance of his death,—to promote the spiritual nourishment and comfort of his people,—to bring them into communion with himself, and with one another,—and to hold up to the world our crucified Redeemer, as worthy of their love and trust; so to accomplish these im-

* Acts ii. 42; xx. 7.

important ends, it ought to be frequently observed.*

If you, my reader, indeed love Christ, and desire to honour his dying commandment, and to receive profit to your own soul; as far as it is in your power, embrace every opportunity of uniting with your Christian brethren, in commemorating his sacrifice for your redemption. This when suitably observed, you will find a powerful means of advancing your growth in grace. Your godly sorrow for sin will be excited, when you look on your best *Friend* and *Ransomer*, pierced by it to the death. Your hatred of it will be strengthened, while you read its immense evil in the costly sacrifice required for its atonement. You will be led to admire and adore the inflexible justice of God, which would not pardon sin without such a satisfaction. Your love to God will be inflamed, by beholding this bright demonstration of his love to our guilty and perishing world, in that he spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all. Your gratitude to Christ will be drawn forth, and invigorated, for his matchless grace and condescension in submitting to ignominy, suffering, and death for your redemption. Your attachment to your brethren will be more confirmed, while you meet with them as the avowed friends of Christ, and join with them as a band of holy brotherhood, in eating the same bread, and drinking the same cup. In fine, by being frequently and devoutly exercised in this service, your faith will be increased, your hope will be animated, your humility will be deepened, and your heavenly-mindedness promoted. Every depraved propensity will

* See the Author's Catechism on the Lord's Supper, section xi.

be weakened and mortified, and every gracious principle more and more matured.

4. If you would grow in grace, be careful to sanctify the Lord's day in private, as well as in public.—Too many seem to act as if they were persuaded that no part of this day is sacred, except the few hours which are occupied in public worship. Before they go to the house of prayer, and after they retire from it, their conversation in no respect differs from that of week-days. Though they abstain from prosecuting their ordinary secular business; yet they talk as freely about it, or any other subject of a worldly nature, as if they had never heard the Divine commandment, *Remember the Sabbath-day to keep it holy*.—Such conduct is inconsistent with the sanctity of this day, and hurtful to the soul. The Jews were required to sanctify the Sabbath, not only by their public *convocations*, or assemblies for worship; but by observing it as “the Sabbath of the Lord in all their dwellings.”* At home, as well as in the synagogues, they were strictly charged to honour the Lord on his holy day, “not doing their own ways, nor finding their own pleasure, nor speaking their own words.”† And who does not see, that it would be impious to suppose, that the sacred extent and strict morality of the Christian Sabbath, should be less than those of the Jewish? Rather, in proportion as our religious advantages are greater than those of the former economy, and our worship more enlightened and spiritual; so ought our observance of every part of the Lord's day to be characterised by greater sanctity.

Let me entreat you, therefore, my reader, if you

* Lev. xxiii. 3.

† Isa. lviii. 13.

desire to grow in grace, to be careful in sanctifying this hallowed day in private and secret, as well as in public. Let its morning hours, instead of being wasted in bed, be conscientiously devoted to the concerns of your soul. As much as you can, let them be employed in reading the word of God, meditating on the resurrection and finished work of Christ, and praying for the prosperity of his church. And in the evening, when you return from the house of God, let it be your habitual practice to occupy the remaining hours in religious exercises,—in conversing with those around you respecting the sacred truths you have heard preached,—in reading pious and devotional books,—in domestic praises to God, and prayer,—and in communing with your own heart in secret, and endeavouring to ascertain what is your preparation for death and eternity.—By following this course, the impressions made on your heart by public ordinances will be preserved and deepened. You will be prepared to engage in the business of the world, and to encounter its temptations, without catching from them hurt; and the blessing of God will descend upon both your soul and your outward estate. Often has it been remarked by the people of God, that the degree both of their worldly prosperity, and their spiritual comfort, has been almost invariably proportioned through the week, to their conscientiousness in observing the duties of the Lord's day.

5. Another means of growing in grace is, frequent religious meditation.—This is necessary to our deriving advantage from the lessons which we receive, both in reading and hearing the word of God.

Were we never, or but seldom, to think of them, except when we are actually engaged in these exercises, we should lose more than half the profit they are calculated to impart. Like the digestive operation of the stomach, which converts the food we eat into nutriment for the body, meditation extracts from the doctrines which we learn that spiritual nourishment by which Christian growth and fruitfulness are promoted. By frequently engaging in this exercise, Divine truth is familiarised to our minds, and more deeply impressed on our memories; we have it more readily at hand for practical use; we are guarded in some measure against vain and sinful imaginations; and we grow in spiritual-mindedness, and learn to set our affections on things above.

This exercise, so obviously beneficial in itself, is commanded by God, and recommended by the example of the most eminent saints. What the Lord said to Joshua, in effect he says to every one of his people; "This book of the law shalt not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein."* In unison with this is the charge which the Spirit of God gives by an apostle to professing believers; "Set your affection," or, as it reads in the margin, *mind*, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on earth."† Of the godly man it is affirmed, "That he meditates in the law of the Lord day and night;" and the Psalmist declares concerning himself, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day:"—"I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches."‡

* Josh. i. 8.

† Colos. iii. 2.

‡ Psal i. 2; cxix. 97; lxiii. 6. •

If you desire to grow in grace, go you and do likewise. Carefully embrace every opportunity which offers for engaging in this exercise, whether it be when you are sitting solitarily in the house, or walking alone by the way, or pursuing any worldly employment which admits of it, or during the sleepless hours of midnight. Often seek retirement from the noise and bustle of the world for this purpose, especially during the calmness of the morning, and the solemnity of the deepening shades of the evening. Above all, let much of the Sabbath, the blessed day of hallowed rest, be devoted to religious meditation. Nor, with the Bible in your hand, need you ever be at a loss for a profitable theme. Any of its doctrines, precepts, examples, predictions, histories, or promises may be selected. But chiefly let the wonders of redeeming love,—the work of Christ on earth and in heaven,—the enlightening, purifying, and comforting agency of the Holy Spirit,—the services which God now requires from you,—and the glorious work and reward of heaven, be the most frequent subjects of your meditations. And for your encouragement remember that it is promised to the man thus exercised; “He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”

6. Frequent self-examination is another means of advancing growth in grace.—The duty and importance of self-examination has already been fully considered; and a series of directions given respecting the manner in which it ought to be performed.*

* See Chapter I. and Chapter III.

What I wish, my reader, to impress on your mind in this place is, that this duty is not requisite only to decide the question whether you are or are not a genuine Christian. Even after you have been enabled in the most satisfactory manner to answer this question, and to know that you have passed from spiritual death to spiritual life, frequent self-examination is still necessary. While you sojourn in a world where you are daily exposed to manifold temptations, and the assaults of numerous and crafty spiritual adversaries; imperfect yet as your nature is, you cannot be free from sin. Every day, in some degree, iniquity will prevail against you. Every day, therefore, you need to engage in this duty, that you may detect the secret invasions of this foe, and as speedily as possible banish it from its lurking place, and repair the mischief which it has wrought. Without frequently engaging in this trial of your practice, your neglect of duty, or indulgence in sin, may for a time pass unperceived, and subject you to spiritual desertion, and painful chastisements.

To avoid such consequences, therefore, and to secure your progressive advancement in grace, frequently engage in self-examination. On the evening of every day, before you bow your knees in secret prayer, for a few minutes seriously ponder what your conduct has been throughout that day,—what duties you have neglected, or superficially performed,—what sins you have committed in word or deed,—what temptations you have overcome, or been vanquished by,—and what good, or evil, you have done, or endeavoured to do, to yourself or to others. Especially let some considerable time be employed in this exercise on the evening of every

Lord's day. By conscientiously observing this course, if you are demeaning yourself as a child of God, you shall enjoy the happiness arising from the assurance of this, and be animated to increasing activity and zeal in his service. On the other hand, when you deviate from the path of duty, you shall be promptly apprised of your guilt, and preserved from running heedlessly on in any practice, dishonouring to God and injurious to your peace. Thus your corrupt propensities will be kept in continual check, and be progressively mortified; and your gracious principles will be watched, cherished, and invigorated.

7. If you desire to grow in grace, abound in prayer, especially ejaculatory prayer.—Numerous and pressing injunctions, and precious and animating promises, are addressed to God's children, to excite them to abound in prayer. "In every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." "Pray without ceasing." "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."* As a prayerful life is characteristic of all genuine saints, so abounding in it is both an evidence of a growing Christian, and a powerful means of promoting his advancement in holiness. The truth is, no Christian can make progress without this, and the more

* Phil. iv. 6; Eph. vi. 18; 1 Thes. v. 17; Matt. vii. 7, 8.

frequent and fervent in prayer any of them is, the more rapidly will he grow in grace.

What I have particularly in view here is *ejaculatory* prayer. This consists in short and commonly silent petitions, suddenly darted up to heaven. The heart is thus raised to God in fervent aspirations, suited to any particular circumstance or emergency. It is praying with the heart, without vocal utterance, and without secret retirement. Thus Moses prayed to the Lord at the Red sea, when the tribes of Israel, just after their emancipation from Egyptian bondage, appeared exposed to inevitable ruin. On the right hand, and on the left, they were hemmed in by impassable rocks and impregnable fortresses; Pharaoh and his men of war pressed hard behind; and the overwhelming deep lay spread before. Though Moses uttered no prayer heard by men, yet he prayed fervently in spirit; and the Lord said unto him, "Wherefore criest thou to me? speak to the children of Israel that they go forward."* In the same manner Hannah, the mother of Samuel, prayed, "for she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard,"† and she obtained an immediate answer to her supplications. And such appears to have been the prayer of Nehemiah, in presence of king Artaxerxes, which also was speedily and graciously answered.‡

The advantages of this method of prayer are numerous and important. It can be practised in all *places*,—in passing along the crowded street, in the midst of the family circle, or in the public assemblies of the saints. It can be practised in all *com-*

* Exod. xiv. 15.

† 1 Sam. i. 12, 13.

‡ Neh. i. 4.

panics,—not only in the society of good men, but when you are necessitated to be among the wicked. It can be practised at *all times*,—not merely in the morning and evening, and other seasons fixed for devotion, but on occasion of the most sudden and unexpected emergencies. It can be practised in following *all employments*,—even those which require much thought, and close attention. It can be practised *without the knowledge of Satan*, who cannot read the secret movements of the heart; and consequently without the same exposure to his disturbing temptations, as at other set times of prayer. Besides, it is by this method principally that you can obey the apostolic injunctions, “to pray always,” and “to pray without ceasing;” and it is not improbable that he had it chiefly in view. In fine, by this kind of prayer you may maintain habitual correspondence with heaven,—may be shielded in every danger,—directed in every difficulty,—and may bring down upon yourself and others showers of blessing.

8. Another means of growth in grace is, habitual watchfulness.—This duty stands intimately connected with prayer. The two are joined together by divine appointment, and ought never to be separated. Our blessed Lord thus commanded his disciples, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”* And the apostle Paul, in harmony with his divine Master, thus charges the saints at Colosse; “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving.”† To pray and not to watch, is impiously to ask God to perform for us, what we are unwilling to endeavour to do for ourselves. To

* Matt. xxvi. 41.

† Col. iv. 2.

watch and not to pray, is presumptuously to rely on our own wisdom, care, and diligence.

This duty obviously proceeds on the supposition that, while the people of God are sojourners on earth, they are continually exposed to danger. They are in an enemy's country, where numerous, crafty, powerful, and malignant foes are incessantly plotting their ruin. The world spreads before them its riches, honours, and forbidden pleasures, attired in all their fascinating allurements, and entices them to join the busy chase in seeking them as their chief good,—the sure and only source of happiness. The men of the world, by their grovelling and unholy example, are ever ready to contaminate them; and by their sophistical reasonings, and the poisoned shafts of ridicule, assiduously endeavour to laugh them out of their religion, and to induce them to join the thoughtless throng who are merrily hurrying to hell. Satan too, with his embattled legions, lie in ambush ready to hurl against them their fiery darts; and if they cannot effect their destruction, at least to do all they can to disturb their peace. Above all, the remaining depravity of their own heart, in a thousand various forms, joins in league with their external adversaries, and tries to entangle them in the deadly toils of sin. “They feel a law in their members warring against the law of their mind, and bringing them into captivity to the law of sin, which is in their members.”*

If you, my reader, desire to escape the entanglements and wounds of these enemies, you must exercise constant watchfulness and circumspection. Like a sentinel in an army, you must never be off

* Rom. vii. 23.

your guard, or indulge in dreams of exemption from danger. Continually you must be on the lookout, and ready to exert yourself on the first intimation of your adversaries' approach. For want of this, Moses, David, Peter, and all saints who have fallen into open sin, were vanquished by their foes. Listen, therefore, to the command of your Lord,—“What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch.”*

9. Another means of advancing growth in grace is, frequent religious conference with them who fear the Lord.—Many of God's children are culpably deficient in this branch of duty. Some from natural timidity and reservedness, cannot prevail with themselves to seek familiar intercourse with their fellow Christians, and to disclose their minds to them respecting these things which lie nearest to their hearts. Others are so frequently under doubts and fears concerning their spiritual state, that they conceive it would be presumption to speak to any of their religious experience. Not a few are discouraged, by the unwarrantable exposure which is sometimes made of private and confidential conference; and, in some cases, it is broken off, or long interrupted, by unhappy misunderstandings, and by giving way to the most pernicious jealousies and strifes. Influenced by these or similar causes, too many Christians deprive themselves of the important advantages derived from private converse with the people of God.

Let me entreat you, my reader, if you desire to make progress in the way to Zion, to seek the companionship of them who fear the Lord. If those with whom you associate be prudently chosen, you

* Mark xiii. 37.

will find frequent religious intercourse with them highly conducive to your spiritual improvement. By this means your knowledge of divine things will be enlarged; for you will superadd to your own information, that of your brethren. “He that walketh with the wise, shall be wise.” You will learn to profit by their religious experience,—learn to shun what has proved hurtful to them, and to pursue what has been instrumental to their edification and comfort. You will obtain their friendly counsel amid your perplexities,—their tender sympathy under all your sorrows, and their prayers for grace to help you in the time of need. Thus your zeal and activity in the service of God will be quickened, and your usefulness and comfort promoted. “As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.”* As live coals, when scattered, soon become cold, but when kept together, burn with increased heat and brightness; so the children of God, when habitually separated from each other, except in public assemblies, are prone to become languid; but by frequently associating in private, they “provoke one another to love and to good works.”

In addition to these advantages, God has given special countenance, and special promises, to such meetings of his saints. Witness the example recorded by the prophet Malachi,—“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in

* Pro. xxvii. 17.

that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him." * Look to the history of the two disciples, who, on their way to Emmaus, were conversing about Christ, and with whom he graciously met, and made their hearts to burn within them.† Listen to his encouraging engagement,—“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”‡ Stimulated by all these powerful considerations, let it be your endeavour to select some of those who fear the Lord, as your most intimate associates, and frequently to meet with them for religious conference.

10. Frequent visitation of them who are in affliction, and on a death-bed, will prove beneficial to your soul.—This sentiment is forcibly inculcated by the *Preacher*, in the book of Ecclesiastes,—“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”§ The religion of the Bible does not interdict all innocent mirth and festivity. Christ himself attended a marriage in Cana, as well as wept at the grave of Lazarus. But solemn and affecting scenes are best fitted to make solemn impressions; and none is more so, than the house of mourning, or the bed of death.

By visiting those who are in affliction, and ap-

* Mal. iii. 16, 17. : † Luke xxiv. 13–32. ‡ Luke xviii. 20.

§ Eccles. vii. 2–4.

parently on the brink of the grave, you will be reminded of what awaits you, and taught seriously to consider whether or not you are yet prepared to bear disease and pain with humble resignation, and to be severed from all on earth you account dear. You will behold what sin has wrought in others, by tracing all their distress and sorrow to this bitter source of every ill; and be made to abhor it as the fatal enemy which quits no son of man, till it has numbered him with the dead. You will receive a lesson of humility, from seeing the most vigorous and beautiful of our race, stripped of their strength and loveliness, and exhibiting sad indication of their speedy return to the dust. You will learn the vanity of this world,—how utterly insufficient its most valued acquisitions are to impart comfort in the near views of eternity; and how soon you must totally and for ever relinquish all in it for which you have laboured,—and which so often has obtained the ascendancy in your heart. You will discover more clearly the necessity and value of those celestial blessings, which are where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God; and be excited to seek them more diligently in the day of your health.—In a word, if those whom you visit be without God, and without hope in the world, and filled with alarm at the prospects of dissolution; you will be aroused to greater diligence in working out your salvation while it is called To-day. Or, if they be the dear children of God, animated with celestial hope, and ardent to depart that they may be with Christ; you will be stimulated to imitate the piety of their life, that you may experience their consolations in the season of affliction and death.

11. Another means of quickening you in the way of holiness is, the perusal of the memoirs of eminent saints.—Many of the people of God have it not in their power to enjoy familiar intimacy with saints of distinguished eminence. Much as they desire it, their situation may preclude them from intercourse with such characters in their health, and from seeing them on the bed of sickness and death. But by means of the published memoirs of many of this stamp, who have lived in past ages, and remote countries, we all are admitted to friendly converse with them,—to see them in the world, the church, the family, and the closet,—to meet with them in adversity, as well as in prosperity; in affliction and death, as well as in the season of health. Through this medium we are enabled to behold “the mighty dead,” in all the varieties of light and shade; and are allowed to hear the secrets of their heart unbosomed. Through this medium we sometimes learn more of their private character, secret exercises, and religious experience, than was perhaps disclosed to their most intimate companions, while they lived.

Every one who has perused these faithful records of Christian experience, must have felt their touching power. With thrilling efficacy they often move the tenderest affections, and excite some of the holiest aspirations, and noblest purposes of heart. Yes, my reader, by frequently reading such portraits of godliness, you will find yourself greatly quickened and improved. You will learn to profit by the errors, falls, and chastisements of the best; and to avoid the snares by which they were entangled and hurt. Their diligence will reprove your slothfulness, and arouse you to run with pa-

tience, ardour, and perseverance the race which is set before you. Their trials and sorrows will prevent you from desponding, when placed in similar circumstances. Their consolations and blissful experience will animate your zeal, to be sharers with them in the joys of God's heritage. And, in fine, their example will excite you, with holy emulation, to be "followers of them who, through faith and patience, are now inheriting the promises."

12. If you would grow in grace, daily recognise the hand of God in his providential dispensations.— You profess to believe, that "the Lord God omnipotent reigneth;" that "his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom from generation to generation; and that he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and that none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"* Far, therefore, from regarding passing events as the results of accident, if you be properly exercised, you will trace them all to *Him* who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will. You will view the actions of all creatures, from the highest to the lowest, as equally under his control; and all incidents, from the most obviously important, to the seemingly most insignificant, as under his superintending direction. Especially in the diversified occurrences of your own lot, your health and your sickness, your prosperity and adversity, you will account them all parts of his ways, who has promised to make "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."†

Thus exercised, when the Lord bestows upon you

* Rev. xix. 6; Deu. iv. 34, 35.

† Rom. viii. 28.

the good things of this life, you will feel yourself called to gratitude and thanksgiving to Him from whom you have received them; and to such a use of his gifts as shall meet with his approval, in that day when you must account for your stewardship. When his allotments to you are dark and mysterious, and apparently the very reverse of what your own wisdom would have dictated; you will not dare to condemn what you cannot comprehend. Though "clouds and darkness are about him;" yet, believing that "righteousness and judgment are the basis of his throne,"* and that it is his province to bring real good out of seeming evil; where you cannot unriddle, you will learn to trust. In a word, in every occurrence, whether it respect yourself, your neighbours, the church, or the state, you will mark and revere the power and the justice, the wisdom and the goodness of God; and experience a tranquillising confidence in the belief, that "He is a rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth, and without iniquity; just and right is he."†

13. Occasionally set apart some time for a full and particular inquiry into your progress in holiness, and your preparation for eternity.—Already I have endeavoured to call you to frequent self-examination, and to show you how beneficial it would be to spend some time in this exercise every evening, before you engage in secret prayer, or at least on the evening of every Lord's day. But in addition to these ordinary seasons for this duty, it would be of great advantage to set apart a day, or a portion of a day, at seldomest once every year, to take a grand balance of your accounts in the view of death

* Psalm xcvi. 2.

† Deut. xxxii. 4.

and eternity. The first day of every year, or your birth-day, or any other which is to you the anniversary of some noted deliverance from danger, will at once more readily remind you of the return of this special service, and tend to impress your mind with additional solemnity.

This has been the practice of many of the most distinguished saints whose lives are on record; and, as they themselves have testified in their written diaries, they found it highly conducive to their spiritual quickening and comfort. Some of them have observed this day in the exercise of fasting; and all of them have employed it in deeply humbling themselves before the Lord; in reading suitable portions of Scripture; in devout meditation; in searching and trying their ways; and in confession, thanksgiving, and importunate prayer. By taking a careful and minute retrospect of the past,—by endeavouring to know their present standing, and whether, on the whole, they have, or have not, made some advances in the way to the heavenly Zion,—and by renewedly devoting themselves to the Lord; they have been better prepared both for duty and suffering, for living and dying.—Go you, my reader, and do likewise. Deem not this too much, that you may win a kingdom and a crown. The animating hopes which are set before you, might well make you willing to spend every day of your life in this manner, were it consistent with your other duties. Grudge not, therefore, the little time thus redeemed from the cares and business of this world. It will turn to good account in the close of life, and when time to you shall be no more.

CHAPTER XII.

ADVANTAGES OF GROWTH IN GRACE. '

1. By growing in grace, you will promote the glory of God.—2. You will advance your own happiness.—3. You will prove beneficial to those who are strangers to godliness.—4. You will strengthen the hands and encourage the hearts of God's children.—5. You will contribute to the joy of heaven.—6. You will render every duty more easy and pleasant.—7. You will be qualified becomingly to bear trials and afflictions.—8. You will be prepared to meet death itself with composure and triumph.—9. You will advance your meetness for heaven.—10. You shall obtain distinguished approbation from Christ, before assembled angels and men.—11. You shall obtain an enlarged share of heavenly glory.—12. It will afford you delightful reflections through eternity.

To excite his people ardently to aspire after growth in grace, God has kindly made known to them, not only the means by which it may be promoted, but also numerous and important advantages with which it is connected. Knowing that they need motives to arouse them to action in the business of their own salvation, much more than in the pursuit of worldly objects, he has graciously been pleased to set before them the most powerful inducements. Had he simply made known to them his will, and commanded them to study to perfect holiness, without condescending to specify any of its benefits; they would have been bound to obey. Instead of this, however, he deals with them as rational creatures. He tells them its present advantages, as well as those which are future; the blessings with which it is accompanied in time, and the ample reward of glory, honour, and immortality, with which it shall be followed

through eternity. To some of these I shall briefly direct your attention; and O that the Spirit of God would so impress them on your heart, that you may be powerfully inclined to abound in the fruits of righteousness!

1. By growing in grace you will promote the glory of God.—Our blessed Lord presses this consideration on the attention of his disciples. After describing himself as the true vine, and his people as branches grafted into him; and reminding them of the necessity of abiding in him, in order to their fruitfulness, he immediately adds; “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit.”* To the same purpose the apostle Paul, when writing to the saints at Philippi, thus expresses himself;—“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that you may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence, till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God.”†

When God created man at first, and stamped on his soul a resemblance to his own moral image; his design was to manifest his own glorious perfections, by qualifying him to show forth his praise. And when any of our race are created anew in Christ Jesus, he has still the same end in view. They are thus re-fashioned after his image, in righteousness and holiness, that they may honour his great name. Then they are bound by the strongest of all ties to live to his praise. A son is bound to love and honour his father. But that son who has rebelled

* John xv. 8.

Philip. i. 9—11.

against his father, and yet been pitied by him, ransomed from captivity at a costly price, and restored to his filial privileges, is doubly bound to these duties. Thus it is with all the redeemed children of God. As Paul addressed believers at Corinth, so it may be said to all the members of the family of grace,—“Ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”* The force of this obligation is powerful indeed, yea, irresistible. All who have properly felt it, are ready to exclaim; “The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him who died for them, and rose again.”†

When the children of God demean themselves, in some degree, suitably to their high and holy calling, it tends powerfully to illustrate and promote the divine glory. The change which has been produced in bringing them from darkness into light, and from sin to holiness, illustrates the greatness of God’s mighty power, and the exceeding riches of his grace. To see men who were once remarkable for impiety, become distinguished for godliness,—men who profaned the name of God, venerating and adoring it with holy awe,—men who were active in the service of Satan, zealous for the honour of Christ,—men who contemned the authority of Jehovah, running in the way of his commandments with alacrity and delight, and solicitous that all should unite with them in his service,—is a brighter demonstration of his power and goodness, than can be learned from all

* 1 Cor. vi. 20.

† 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

his works of creation. The fruits of righteousness brought forth in the conversation and deportment of such men, exhibit a bright display of his marvellous grace; and call loudly on all who behold them, to mark what God has wrought.

Animated by these considerations, let it be your study, my reader, thus to promote the glory of your heavenly Father. If you sincerely love him, his honour must be dear to your heart; and you must be desirous to advance it, according to your ability. In no way can you do this, except by a life of holiness. The more you abound in every good word and work, the more will you testify your respect for his authority, and contribute your mite to farther his glory.

2. Growth in grace will advance your own peace and comfort.—No man can enjoy true and solid peace, till he be in a state of acceptance with God. “The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.”* Whatever apparent tranquillity and happiness such persons may seem to possess, they are altogether unsubstantial and transitory. They abandon them when they stand most in need of support, and leave them the prey of remorse and despair.—As none but genuine saints can taste that peace of God which passeth all understanding; so none even of them can experience it, except when they are making progress in a life of holiness. It is then only that these evidences of their acceptance with God, from which evangelical peace springs, can be satisfactorily perceived. When they are in a declining state, and, so

* Isaiah lvii. 20, 21.

far from advancing in gracious attainments, seem to be going backwards; they must be stripped of joy and peace in believing. It is only by the *present* evidences of grace that these blessings can be enjoyed. How plain and decisive soever these evidences may have been in time past, if they be deprived of them in the mean while, their spiritual comfort in a great measure must for the present be lost. Though it is a cheering truth, that wherever God has begun the good work, he will not forsake it utterly, but will assuredly perform it till the day of Jesus Christ; yet he has wisely so ordered it, that his children cannot experience the joy which this truth is calculated to inspire, when they depart from the path of duty, and give themselves up to sloth and security. In every such case he chastises their faults, by hiding from them the light of his countenance, and withholding the quickening influences of his Spirit. The consequence is, that they can derive no peace and comfort from their former experience. Spiritual darkness overspreads their horizon,—doubts and fears fill them with perplexity,—and their wonted gladness is turned into mourning.

That Christian, on the contrary, who is growing in grace, advancing in the path of duty from one attainment in holiness to another still greater, is a partaker of spiritual peace and comfort. In some degree he is enabled to trace the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart and temper, his affections and practice; and, with holy joy, to discover in himself the marks of God's children, as these are delineated in his word. By some this is more sensibly experienced than by others. But in general it is the

happy attainment of all saints, in exact proportion to their diligence and progress in the ways of godliness. It is the blissful reward by which God testifies his approbation of their obedience and activity in his service,—a reward which none but they who exert themselves do enjoy. To expect this “calm sunshine, and heart-felt joy,” without growing in grace, is just as unreasonable, and will prove as unsuccessful, as to hope for verdure, blossoms, and fruit on the trees of a garden in the midst of winter.—If you, therefore, value spiritual peace, and desire to experience that joy which springs from the assured hope of eternal life; forget not that they are to be found only by increasing sanctification and fruitfulness. And let this stimulate you to a diligent and persevering improvement of the means of grace.

3. By growing in grace, you will prove beneficial to those who are strangers to godliness.—This motive is particularly specified by Christ, and urged as a cogent reason why his disciples should endeavour to exemplify a conversation becoming the gospel:—“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”* And, in accordance with this, the apostle Peter thus affectionately expostulates with believers, scattered by persecution in heathen countries; “Dearly beloved, I beseech you, as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul: having your conversation honest among the Gentiles; that, whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may, by your good works which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of

* Mat. v. 16.

visitation.”* Though the followers of Christ are not all commanded to officiate as preachers of the gospel; yet they are all bound to exhibit its sanctifying effects in their language, company, and general demeanour, and thus to be practical advocates for the truth. And were all who bear his name to conduct themselves in this manner, by being “blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom they did shine as lights in the world;” what blessed effects would ensue. The enemies of Christianity would be put to silence and shame,—the reality of religion and its beneficial tendency would be too apparent to be denied,—and many who scoff, would be led to pray.

The unholy lives of professing Christians do far more injury to the Redeemer’s cause, than all the sophistical reasonings, and pointed ridicule, and polluted ribaldry, of its most artful and malignant adversaries. The conduct of such persons wrung the heart of Paul with anguish: “Many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies to the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is their shame, who mind earthly things.”† And even the unfruitful lives of genuine Christians, who are so cold and worldly that they can scarcely be distinguished from many who have no religious profession, produce in some degree the same pernicious effects. “By reason of them the way of truth is evil spoken of.”‡ The inconsistency of their practice with their high and holy profession, opens the mouth of the adversary to blas-

* 1 Peter ii. 11, 12.

† Philipp. iii. 18, 19.

‡ 2 Peter ii. 2.

pheme, and confirms the prejudices of unbelievers against the gospel.

In fine, as a judicious and powerful writer observes,—“ One noisy, imprudent, and inconsistent zealot for evangelical doctrines, who neither knows nor practises the duties of his station, but is habitually guilty of manifest crimes, or glaring improprieties, will expose the truth to the contempt of a whole family, village, or neighbourhood. Whereas a single Christian, matured in grace, notwithstanding incidental failures and manifold infirmities, of which he is humbly conscious, will obtain a testimony in the consciences of all his connections, and win upon their hearts; he will soften their prejudices, silence the reproaches, and live down the contempt of the circle in which he moves; and evangelical truth will acquire such a respectability in a neighbourhood, where consistent Christians are numerous, as none can properly conceive, who have not actually witnessed it.”*

Be jealous of yourself, my reader, lest you should be instrumental in hurting the Redeemer's cause, and in contributing to the guilt and everlasting misery of any around you. Rather let it be your noble ambition to do what you can, by a holy example, to win souls to Christ,—to allure them to his service, and to induce them to take on his yoke which is easy, and his burden which is light. Listen to the sacred monition addressed to saints: “ Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience, that whereas they speak evil of you, as evil doers, they may be ashamed

* Scott on Growth in Grace.

that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.”*

4. By growing in grace, you will strengthen the hands and encourage the hearts of God’s children.— That God takes a special interest in the joys and sorrows of his people, might be justly inferred from what he has done to effectuate their salvation. But we are not left to form this conclusion from mere inference. He has explicitly assured us, that, “in all their afflictions, he is afflicted;” and that “he who toucheth them,” to harm them, “toucheth the apple of his eye.”† And our blessed Lord has testified, that the very smallest act of kindness to them, shall be recognised by him as if it had been done to himself; “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”‡

To grieve the generation of God’s children, therefore, is displeasing to him, and will be punished by him. “Whoso shall offend one of these little ones,” saith Christ, “who believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea;”§—in other words, It were better for any man to lose his natural life, than to be the instrument of disheartening, stumbling, and causing to fall into sin, any of the genuine disciples of Christ. Yet this guilt is chargeable, not only on the avowed adversaries of Christianity, but also sometimes on believers themselves. By conformity to the world,—by lukewarmness in religion,—and by untender and unguarded conduct; they discourage and grieve some of

* 1 Peter iii. 15, 16.

† Matt. xxv. 40.

‡ Isa. lxiii. 9; Zech. ii. 8.

§ Matt. xviii. 6.

their brethren, and ensnare others by their example. Thus they doubly incur the displeasure of their heavenly Father, and subject themselves to his chastisements,—both on account of the spiritual harm which they do to themselves, and to their fellow saints.

But, on the other hand, when believers demean themselves suitably to their Christian character and profession; when they are obviously the living epistles of Christ, known and read of all men; they are instrumental in animating their brethren to imitate their pattern. Their hearts are filled with gladness and thanksgiving to God on their behalf; they are prompted to similar diligence and zeal for the honour of Christ; and they are excited to steadfast perseverance in prosecuting their journey to the good land of promise.—Thus fellow-travellers are encouraged and strengthened, when they behold those who accompany them, lively, ardent, and unremitting in their progress. Though ready to succumb, and to relax their speed; and though intimidated by the hardships and dangers before them; they are shamed out of their indolence and fear, and aroused to renewed and redoubled exertion, by the activity and courage of their companions.—How ought this consideration to induce all who are journeying to the heavenly Canaan, to endeavour to be helpful to one another by the way! Instead of retarding each other's progress, and grieving each other's hearts; every one of them ought to do all in his power to stimulate his brethren to diligence, and to minister to their spiritual joy.

5. By growing in grace, you will contribute to the joy of heaven.—From the parable of the lost sheep,

over which the shepherd rejoiced when he had found it, our Redeemer took occasion to utter these words: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." And, in a verse immediately following, he adds: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."* But if there be joy in heaven when a sinner is first turned from the error of his ways, and made spiritually alive by the Holy Ghost; we cannot doubt that his growing assimilation to the image of Christ, will there also be ground of gladness,—gladness to angels, to the spirits of the redeemed, and to God himself.

We have reason to believe that many of the angelic host are commissioned to visit our world, and commanded to take a particular charge of those who are appointed to eternal life. The Psalmist's cheering declaration is: "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."† And the inspired penman of the epistle to the Hebrews thus expresses himself: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"‡ With what delight, therefore, must they behold the objects of their charge honouring and serving their Lord, and ripening apace for the kingdom of glory! With what joy will they communicate the intelligence to other kindred spirits in heaven, and swell the notes of their song to the Lamb who was slain!

More highly still will this gladden the glorified spirits of redeemed men. As they must necessarily be much more interested in those whom they left on earth, it seems probable that the very first to whom

* Luke xv. 7, 10.

† Psalm xxxiv. 7.

‡ Heb. i. 14.

ascending angels impart the news of the conversion of sinners, and of their growing meetness for heaven, will be their glorified relations and friends. And O what exalted felicity will such tidings impart to them! What rapturous thanksgivings and praise will they inspire! If the redeemed on earth derive much happiness from the godly deportment of their kindred; much more will this be the experience of saints in heaven. They have much clearer conceptions of the value of the soul, and the blessedness of being with Christ; and, consequently, must feel higher joy, in knowing that those whom they love are ardently seeking preparation to meet them, and to participate in their pure and ineffable delights. Could their voice reach our world, it would be heard addressing them,—“O hasten, hasten, to obtain a meetness for heaven! If you saw our glory, and felt our bliss, you would account no labour or suffering too great to win our prize! We rejoice in your advancing holiness, and praise the Lamb on your behalf! We long to see you home! O hasten, hasten, to be ready for the coming of our Lord!”

Above all, God himself rejoices in the spiritual advancement of his people. This is true of each of the adorable **THREE** in the one Godhead. The Father rejoices to see his children conformed to his image, zealous for his glory, and bringing forth the fruits of righteousness to his praise. The Son rejoices to behold those who are the travail of his soul, the fruit of his purchase, and the reward of his pain, becoming progressively meet for the kingdom which he has prepared for them. And the Holy Spirit rejoices to witness his sanctifying agency in their hearts, manifested by the purity of their lives.

Thus it may be said of all the Lord's people collectively, who are growing in grace, as it was said in ancient times to Zion: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing."*

6. Growth in grace will render every duty more easy and pleasant.—Every requirement of Christ is in itself most reasonable, and calculated to promote both the present and the eternal happiness of his people. "His commandments are not grievous."† "His yoke is easy, and his burden is light."‡ Sometimes, however, the people of God feel as if the contrary of all this were true. Their religious services prove to them rather an irksome task, than a source of true enjoyment. Though they dare not abandon them, yet they experience little heart for their observance.—This is always the case with those who are in a state of spiritual decline. Like a person deprived of bodily health, to whom every accustomed exercise is painful, they neither feel inclination for duty, nor derive from it spiritual delight.

How different is the experience of all who are making progress in a life of holiness! They are disposed to run in the way of God's commandments with cheerfulness and alacrity. Animated with suitable views of Christ's matchless love to their souls, and actuated by lively gratitude in return; they are sincerely desirous to do his will, and to contribute to the advancement of his glory.—Love makes any service comparatively easy. The commands of a person whom we highly esteem, are obeyed with promptitude and zeal. We are glad of opportunities

* Zeph. iii. 17.

† 1 John v. 3.

‡ Matt. xi. 30.

to serve him, and to demonstrate to him the sincerity and ardour of our attachment.—Just so it is with those who are growing in devotedness to the service of God. “The love of Christ constraineth them.”—sweetly yet powerfully draws them to estimate aright the strength of those obligations under which he has laid them, to live not to themselves, but to him who died for them. The hardest duty which he prescribes, they account not burdensome. Their bitterest enemies they can forgive and love, because Christ has commanded them. Their dearest earthly comforts they can surrender without a murmur, when he calls for them. And even life itself they can willingly sacrifice to the honour of his truth and cause.

7. Growth in grace will qualify you becomingly to bear trials and afflictions.—Great as Christ’s love to his people is, he does not warrant them to expect either exemption from present calamities and distresses, or that their share of them shall be comparatively small. On the contrary, he has assured them, that “in the world they shall have tribulation;” and that daily they shall find, in one way or other, that in following him, they must bear the cross.* The apostle Paul, therefore, when he exhorted believers to continue steadfast in their holy profession, faithfully apprised them, “that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”† In common with the rest of mankind, they are doomed to endure losses and disappointments in their worldly affairs, afflictions and bereavements in their families, trials from the ungodly conduct of kindred or connexions, and trouble in their own

* John xvi. 33; Luke ix. 23.

† Acts xiv. 22.

mortal bodies. And, in addition to all these, which sometimes form no short catalogue, often do they experience in the state of their souls much disquietude and alarm. The assaults of their spiritual foes, the struggles of inbred corruption, doubts and fears, fiery temptations and seasons of desertion, render their condition not infrequently distressful; and compel them to exclaim, "O wretched men that we are! who shall deliver us from this body of death?"

Under such trials and afflictions, they who are not growing in grace, are commonly dark and disconsolate; and feel their load of suffering doubly heavy. Incapable of seeing the evidences of their interest in Christ, they cannot view these distressful allotments as tokens of his care and love. So far from this, they frequently account them indicative of his wrath,—proofs that he has utterly cast them off, and harbingers of their eternal misery. Hence the great disquietude and perplexity so often manifested by the children of God in the season of suffering.

How different is the experience of them who are advancing in conformity to the image of Christ! They are prepared to meet with trials and sufferings, and to bear up under them with patient resignation and joyful hope. Knowing in whom they have believed, and relying on his faithful word and promise, they are enabled to view them as a part of his unerringly wise discipline, intended at once to correct them for their sins, and to purify them from their defilement:—"If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will

I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes."* "By this, therefore, shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged; and this is all the fruit to take away his sin."† He chastises us "for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness."‡ Supported by this belief, and cheered with the assurance of the kind design and blessed issue of all their afflictions; they are enabled not only patiently to bear them, but to be joyful under them. They can adopt the language of Paul to believers at Rome; "We glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us."§

8. By growing in grace you will be prepared to meet death itself with composure and triumph.—Many of the Lord's people are far from enjoying this happiness. They who have been called to attend the death-bed scenes of good men,—men who have given indubitable evidence of their piety, have found them not infrequently annoyed with doubts, or at least without sensible comfort. Though they may not be left so far as to account themselves lost for eternity; yet they experience nothing of that assurance which fills them with joy and peace in believing. The utmost they attain is, to venture with some trembling hope to commit their souls to Christ, and to say with the patriarch Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."|| And sometimes even thus far they can scarcely arrive.

Cases of this nature are truly painful. They are

* Psalm lxxxix. 30—32.

† Isaiah xxvii. 9.

‡ Heb. xii. 10.

§ Rom. v. 3-4.

|| Job xiii. 15.

painful to those children of God who are placed in those circumstances, and who are deprived of spiritual light and comfort at this trying season, when they are most eminently needed. And they are painful to pious relatives and friends, who, at such a time, expect to hear practical evidence of the consolations of Christ; and to receive encouragement to greater diligence, patience, and perseverance in the way of holiness.—But painful as they are, we may venture to affirm, that in every instance they are to be regarded as a righteous chastisement from the Lord. He afflicteth not, nor grieveth willingly his children at any time; and much less would he do so at such a season, were it not to reprove and correct them for their former slothfulness and transgressions.

Those Christians, and those alone, who are steadily advancing in the way of holiness, who are diligent in the business of their salvation, and whose loins are daily girded and their lamps burning, are in a state of preparation to meet the last enemy with comfort. And usually such persons do meet death, not simply free from dismay, but with hope and joy, and sometimes even with triumph. Scenes of this kind, though far from being so common as could be wished, occur sufficiently often to prove the blissful effects of decided and zealous godliness, and the powerful nature of those celestial supports and consolations which God imparts to his faithful people at the solemn hour of death. At this important crisis, such calm and unshaken confidence have they in the love and faithfulness, the power and grace of Christ; and such enlivening and felicitating foretastes of heavenly bliss; that many of them seem

as if they were already set free from the body of sin and death, and admitted into the joy of their Lord. When all around are bathed in tears, and reluctant to part with friends so highly esteemed; the accents of praise dwell on their lips,—the visions of glory open to their view,—and earnestly do they pant to be away, and to join the communion and anthem of heaven. With the Psalmist David, they can sing; “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”* And in holy exultation they can join with Paul; “I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand: I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”† “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”‡ Who would not desire thus to die?—thus to enjoy the consolations of Christ, and to honour the riches of his grace, in passing from time into eternity.

9. By growing in grace, you will advance your

* Psalm xxiii. 4.

† 2 Tim. iv. 7.

‡ 1 Cor. xv. 53—57.

meetness for heaven.—To accomplish this is the grand design of all the means of grace with which God has furnished you. In the highest acceptation of the apostle's words, it is "to make you meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." Even after you are regenerated by the Spirit of God, you need much training to qualify you for the court of Him who is King of kings; and this can be obtained only in the school of Christ. It is only by growing in grace that you can be fitted for the honour and enjoyments of celestial glory. Your gracious tempers, affections, and habits must be formed and matured, before you can fully relish the pure delights of heaven. Without this you could not enjoy the beauties of that holy place, or be qualified for its society, employments, and pleasures.

The celestial Jerusalem is described as "a city the very streets of which are of pure gold, transparent as glass; without any temple, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it; and having no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it, for the glory of God does lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."* As there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, you must have thoroughly washed your robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, before you shall tread its streets.—Besides, your sanctification must be complete, to qualify you for the *society* of heaven. This shall consist of God himself revealed in glorious majesty, Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, holy angels, and all the myriads of the redeemed, out of every kindred, and people, and language. Your fitness to enjoy this society must

* Rev. xxi. 21–23.

depend on your present improvement of your Christian privileges. The nearer you are assimilated to perfect holiness now, the better will you be prepared to enjoy converse with them who are all perfectly holy; and to sit down in communion with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of God.—In fine, advancement in grace is necessary to qualify you for the employments and pleasures of heaven. Numerous and diversified as these doubtless shall be, and utterly ignorant of the nature of some of them as we may be in our present state; we have cause to believe, from what is said of them in the word of God, that they are all holy, and suited to impart happiness to them only whose sanctification is perfect.—As you, therefore, desire to obtain meetness for heaven, let it be your daily endeavour to grow in grace. Steadily keep this in view as the tendency and design of every duty which you perform, and of every gracious affection which you study to cherish. Think of your future home; the society in which you hope to spend eternity; the adorations, songs, and benevolent employments which await you in heaven; and the pure joys of perfect love to Christ, and to all that is good and holy, which you there shall attain. And, animated by these prospects, let your aim now daily be, to perfect holiness in the fear of God.

10. They who make greatest progress in grace, shall obtain the most distinguished approbation from Christ, before assembled angels and men.—Many willingly embark in difficult and perilous services, from the hope of being honoured by their earthly sovereign. To be admitted into his presence, and to be allowed to kiss his hand, or to receive from him

some gilded title as a token of his approval; they regard as a recompence for years of labour and danger. And shall the children of this world so highly value the applause and perishing honours of earthly potentates, while the sons of God are backward to exert themselves for his approbation, and the attainment of that honour which few kings shall enjoy? Far be the unbecoming comparison! In proportion as the latter infinitely transcend the former, ought to be the diligence exemplified in their pursuit.

In that great and terrible day of the Lord, when Christ shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe, he himself assures us, that, after he has raised the dead, and collected them around his tribunal, he will highly honour all his servants:—"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from his goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left."* In the honourable station thus assigned to the whole body of the redeemed, it seems highly probable that those of them who have been most devoted to his service, shall be placed nearest to himself, and marked out as the most precious of all his precious jewels. And, in addition to this, the language in which he shall address them, shall be a public testimonial, in the hearing of this august assembly, how much he approves of their exemplary diligence. This he plainly taught in the parable of the talents,—a parable the express design of which

* Matt. xxv. 31—33.

is, to excite his followers to the active and zealous improvement of their advantages. To every one of those who have laid them out for his glory and their own spiritual profit, he tells us that he will thus speak in terms of honourable commendation; "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." From the lips of such a King, and in the presence of such an assembly, who would not desire to receive such exalting approbation! Yet high as it is, it shall be the attainment of all who have been faithful in his service. Knowing, as he does, all their exertions in Christian duty,—their secret wrestlings in prayer and deeds of beneficence, as well as their public efforts to promote his cause; he will then announce them to their honour. They shall "be found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ."*

11. The more you grow in grace, the greater shall be your share of heavenly glory.—This doctrine, I am aware, is opposed by some theological writers. The main of their arguments against degrees of glory in heaven are, "that all the children of God are loved by him with the same love, all chosen together in Christ, equally interested in the same covenant of peace, equally redeemed with the same blood, and all equally saved by grace. Consequently, they allege, that to suppose there shall be different degrees of honour and blessedness among the redeemed in heaven, is to eclipse the glory of Divine grace, and carries with it the legal idea of their being rewarded for their works."—In reply to this reasoning it might be sufficient to say, that equality among the saints on earth might as well be

* 1 Peter i. 7.

inferred from these considerations, as equality among them in heaven; for they are now as much loved by the same love, chosen in Christ, &c., as they shall be hereafter. Yet we now see them possess very different measures of holiness and spiritual joy; and that these are proportioned to them according to their diligence in duty.

But though various reasons could be assigned for believing that there shall be degrees of glory in heaven; yet the only conclusive and satisfactory proof is derived from the Sacred Scriptures. The prophet Daniel gives plain intimation of it: "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise (teachers) shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."* The apostle Paul is very explicit respecting it:—"There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory; so also is the resurrection of the dead."† And a greater than prophets and apostles, our Divine Redeemer himself, taught this doctrine. In the parable of the talents, formerly mentioned, he shows that the future reward of his people shall be proportioned to their present improvement of their advantages. To one faithful servant, authority is given over *ten cities*; and to another, authority over *five cities*."‡ And, in the most unequivocal terms, he asserts, "The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father, with his angels; and then shall he reward every man according to his works."§

* Dan. xii. 2, 3. † 1 Cor. xv. 41, 42. ‡ Lu. xix. 17, 19. § Mat. xvi. 27.

From these Scripture testimonies it appears, that the future reward of God's children shall be proportioned to their present growth in grace. According as this has been greater or less, shall every one of them obtain a degree of glory and blessedness.—They who receive even the least degree, it is true, shall be unspeakably happy. All of them shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.* All of them shall experience that fulness of joy and pleasure which are at God's right hand for evermore.† All of them shall have diadems of royalty set on their heads, palms of victory put into their hands, and be clothed with robes of celestial whiteness. Concerning all of them it is testified, "These are they who came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more: neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat: for the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."‡—But full though they all shall be of glory and bliss; yet, like vessels of different capacities, some of them shall be able to contain more than others. And this difference in their capacities for receiving the honours and felicities of heaven, shall bear some proportion to that degree of improvement in Christian knowledge and holiness which they attain on earth.

How ought this prospect to excite you, my dear

* Matt. xiii. 43. † Psalm xvi. 11. ‡ Rev. vii. 14—17.

reader, to aspire after a high measure of growth in grace? Far from being satisfied with simply obtaining admission into heaven, seek to reach as near a place to Christ as you possibly can. Let your noble and praiseworthy ambition be, to receive from him one of the brightest crowns in glory, and to be qualified to enjoy the largest measure of celestial honour and bliss.

12. The higher your growth in grace now is, the more pleasurable will your reflections be through eternity.—We cannot doubt that the redeemed in heaven shall possess a clear recollection of all their transactions, during the days of their sojourning on earth. Indeed, this will be necessary to call forth their grateful ascriptions of praise to God and the Lamb, for that matchless love and grace which rescued them from the depths of guilt and misery, and brought them to the enjoyment of glory. In thinking of their former state and conduct, could anguish of heart be felt in heaven, and tears of sorrow be shed there, what should be their experience at the remembrance of every transgression with which they were chargeable, especially those committed after they had felt the power of redeeming grace! How would every omission of duty, and cold and careless observance of Christ's requirements, pierce them to the heart! Perceiving then, as they must, the full force of their obligations to Christ, and the immeasurable evil of every instance of ingratitude to such a Friend and Saviour; we might suppose they would blush every time he looked them in the face, and be stung with remorse, at the remembrance of their little zeal for his honour, who has done so much for them.

But though we are assured that pain and sorrow, of every kind, are utterly unknown in heaven; yet of this also we may be certain, that while their former deficiencies cannot contribute to their happiness, their growth in grace most unquestionably shall. While those who have made little progress in spiritual improvement, shall experience little pleasurable reflection from the retrospect of time; those who have assiduously exerted themselves in Christ's service, shall derive from the review of their labours the most delightful satisfaction. Indeed, no portion of human life will then appear worthy of a thought, except what has been devoted to his honour, and their own growing preparation for being with him in heaven. But every part of it thus employed, shall be a theme of grateful remembrance. It will sweeten the bliss of their mind, and the melody of their enrapturing song:—"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, from henceforth, saith the Spirit; yea, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them."

Animated by these considerations, let it be your endeavour, my dear reader, to grow in grace. Diligently persist in improving those means which God has appointed for this purpose. Never forget that it is the Spirit of God alone who can crown your efforts with success. To him, therefore, habitually look up in prayer and humble dependence, that he would carry you forward from one attainment in grace to another still higher, till you reach the loftiest pitch of Christian perfection. Finally, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things

are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things, and do them: and the God of peace shall be with you.” “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever.” Amen.

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